

MAX PAYNE

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Dedicated to those who journey through the darkness.

Part I: The American Dream

The Murder

At last the blizzard waned, ceasing its howling fury against the city and giving way to the frigid sky above. New York stretched like a nightmare maze below me. The sirens flooded the scene, a host of banshees, a demonic chorus that had pursued me from the beginning. And rightly so.

They were all dead. The final gunshot was an exclamation mark to everything that had led to this point. My frozen hand loosed its grip from the gun.

It was over.



To make any kind of sense of it, I need to go back three years. Back to the night the pain started. I was still in the force, NYPD, Manhattan, Midtown North Precinct.

Hell's Kitchen. Another life. Another me, now unrecognizable.

The precinct was a morgue. Most of the guys had already knocked off for the day. Some had gone on to happy hour down at Cuffs—a local dick dive I hadn't spooked since making a desk—to drown the horrors. Others had gone home to their families and I had cast-iron plans to do likewise.

I rose from my desk, scanning the stack of paperwork that seemed to continuously decorate the cheap wood. It would wait. Funny, but back then, I thought I was getting my priorities straight. I shut down my computer and reached for my coat. A voice surprised me from behind.

"Heading out early, huh?" It was Alex Balder. The DEA Special agent grinned behind his neatly trimmed beard, smooth scalp gleaming under the fluorescents.

"You're behind the times," I said, slipping on my coat. "I'm regular now. Nine-to-fiver."

"That right?" Alex said, incredulous. "Well, when you get bored riding stationery you come work for me, okay?" He laughed.

I fetched a Marlboro Light from my inside pocket. My last one. I'd been saving it for today. Around the cigarette I said, "You'd make me work undercover in some hellhole. Sorry, Alex, Michelle and the baby come first."

Alex reached forward and straightened my tie. "Since when?"

"Since now." I took a long drag and killed the cigarette. "See? My last smoke. It's bad for the baby."

"Right," Alex said, and slapped my shoulder. "That's you, Max, a regular boy scout. Go on then, go home. Give Michelle a kiss from me, won't you?"

"Sure, Alex, see ya." I walked to the precinct's wide double doors, the streets beyond the office a mass of homeward bound commuters. I went outside and breathed in the evening air.

"Hey, Max!" Alex called, catching the door before it closed. "We're still on for Poker Thursday, *right?*"

I smiled without looking back. "Like taking candy from a baby."



Life was good. The sun setting on a sweet summer's day, the smell of freshly mowed lawns, the sounds of children playing. Our house sat across the river on the Jersey-side. A beautiful wife and a baby girl. The American dream come true.

Alex had once said dreams have a nasty habit of going bad when you're least expecting. At the time I hadn't thought much of his prophecy.

I arrived home, anxious to be inside, to feel Michelle's lips against my own, to hold little Rose in my arms. Outside the sun finished its act of setting with practiced bravado. Twilight crept across the sky giving it a sense of foreboding I'd not noticed before.

I cracked my front door open quietly in case our little princess was napping. If she was, I'd give Michelle a neck massage, maybe a glass of wine before bed...

I froze in the foyer and listened. The house was dark. My ears strained for the sound of the television, of Michelle's absent-minded singing—that little half-hummed, half-spoken way she'd sometimes mumble to herself while cooking, or rocking the baby, or making love...

"Michelle? Honey? Anybody home?" Maybe she'd popped next door to the Peterson's place. She'd had no plans for the night, no babysitter scheduled. If anything had come up she would have called the office, or...

"Michelle?" The sense I was on display, being watched somehow, pervaded my mind. If this was some candid camera trick I didn't like the way the show started. But I'd been given the best seat in the house. Front row center.

"Honey?"

A quick shower before dinner, maybe. Then why the darkness? I tried the lights, finding the switch plate first then flicking on the juice. Nothing.

"Michelle!"

The edge of panic that had slipped into my voice scared me. Unthinkingly, my Beretta's cold form found its way into my hands. I walked the length of the hallway in slow motion, an image in my mind of our friends and family waiting in the living room to scream 'surprise!'. But it wasn't my birthday. Wasn't our anniversary...

I paused. In the gloom of the twilight-lit hallway I saw a shape, something ugly that'd been tattooed hastily onto the Morris print wallpaper. A black **V** still wet and running ragged rivulets down the wall. It was a poison syringe, a magic tag full of diabolical meaning inscrutable to me. My hands clenched tighter around the gun until my knuckles gleamed. An alarm went off. I nearly blew a hole in wall before I realized it was our telephone.

My hand snatched up the receiver, almost dropping the damn thing on the table. Without thinking I said, "Call 911, I think someone's broken into my house!"

A voice crackled on the other end. The sound was all polished brass and aged whiskey, feminine. "Is this the *Payne* residence?"

"Yes!" I reeled off my address. "Someone's broken into my house, I think they're still here, so either call 911 or get off the phone—"

“Good. I’m afraid I cannot help you.”

I stood in disbelief at the still-dripping tag, at the words I was hearing. “Who *is* this?”

The line went dead.

That’s when the screaming began. No time to make another call. With the gun drawn I raced to the living room. No surprise party here, only the afterglow of the day filtering through the half-closed Venetians. I turned and clambered up the stairs with the grace of a new-born gazelle.

“Michelle!”

Her voice came to me, distant and muffled. “Max... Please...!”

Gun shots.

I reached the landing and slammed against the wall, momentum carrying me to the bathroom. Our bedroom was en suite. I kicked open the door, where I thought the sounds were coming from. Inside I tried the adjoining door to our bedroom. It opened a few inches then stuck fast. I slammed against it, shoulder first.

“Michelle!”

She screamed again. Three more gunshots.

I beat my fists against the stubborn door. Something had fallen against it, a dresser or the wardrobe.

A new voice rose from the chaos, dripping with the same dark stuff the tag had been sprayed with.

“It’s coming. It *is* coming! It’s coming for us all!”

That was enough. I fled the bathroom and ran back to the landing. As I reached the nursery door it burst open.

“Freeze! NYPD!”

An emaciated figure lurched out of the shadows.

“It’s *HERE!*” the stranger cried. “It’s *COMING!*”

I didn’t waste time debating with him. The Beretta’s report was a thunderclap in the narrow hallway. The man went down, tumbling backward into the sky and cloud wallpapered nursery. I followed him in without thinking, without a plan. My worst nightmare was confirmed with a simple glance at the fallen crib, the limp form of a little princess beneath bloodstained bedding.

“NO! No, no, please, God, no...” I was rambling, the words bubbling out of me from dark pit.

“The *FLESH* of fallen angels!”

I whipped around in time to see a dark creature looming in our bedroom doorway. The Beretta was a bowling ball in my hand, my arm a rusty hinge. It took forever to level the sights at the intruder’s distorted face.

One shot. He flew backwards with a wild, piercing scream. I rushed from the nursery into the bedroom before the body hit the ground.

The room had been trashed, photo frames broken on the floor, lampshades toppled. I saw all of it and nothing. The bed loomed large before me, no longer a marriage bed but an altar;

Michelle's limp body a sacrifice placed upon it, unmoving. I staggered forward numbly. I could tell she was dead by the empty staring eyes, the paleness of her face.

A noise rose to my ears from far away. More screaming. This time it was my own, and I thought it would never stop.

The world went black.



That was three years ago. Everything ripped apart in a New York minute.

Alex had told me that the killer junkies had been high on a previously unknown designer drug, *Valkyr*. V.

After the funeral, I told Alex I would be transferring to the DEA. He didn't say anything at the time, but I could tell he was doing me a favor. I was damaged goods, unpredictable. He took me in anyway.

They say all things come to those who wait. They were right. We waited three long years to get a break in the Valkyr case, until finally a dime-dropper tipped us off that Jack Lupino, a mob boss in the Punchinello crime family, was trafficking.

I remembered my last meeting with Alex before going undercover. Sitting together in a crummy diner he had grinned, a friendly bear, but I had seen it in his eyes. We hadn't been on the side of the winners in a long time.

He was playing it safe, talking shop. "To get to the source, we need to get to Jack Lupino. For that, you need the trust of the small-timers in the Punchinello family. Joey and Virgilio Finito. Lupino's number one man, Vinnie Gognitti. All the wise guys."

It must have been there, somewhere. The sign of things to come. Clear in the fear in Alex's eyes, in the darkness of the coffee I was drinking, in the way my Beretta dug painfully into my side. But we were blind to it then, closing our eyes to it. Refusing to see it.

Later that night, Max Payne as a DEA special agent was erased from the vast network of databases, and replaced with a new version of me: Max Payne, the career criminal with a mile-long rap sheet.

I went undercover, infiltrated the worst Mafia family in New York.

Roscoe Street Station

The motel was mob infested dive. I came in from the cold and the dark and almost welcomed its chintzy, warm decor. Outside, the city was a cruel monster with a frozen heart. I warmed my hands with my breath before surreptitiously moving to my usual pay phone. No one lingered in the drab lobby, not even the clerk who was probably in the back room with some hooker.

Since transferring and going undercover I'd slowly worked my way from small-time to the big fish, trying to get to Medusa's head—the source of the Valkyr drug. I'd gone deep, Alex and his partner B.B. my only contacts in the DEA, the only ones in this decrepit city who knew I was down here among the roaches and dirty needles.

The pay phone rang. I picked it up on the second ring.

"V for victory," I whispered.

"Maxey, B.B. here. Listen, something urgent has come up with Lupino. You need to meet with Alex, immediately."

"Where?" I didn't like the fear in B.B.'s voice.

"Roscoe Street Station, thirty minutes."

I hadn't had a face-to-face with Alex since going undercover. My mind raced. What had happened with Lupino urgent enough to risk blowing my cover?

"I'll be there." The line went dead.

Back outside the mercury was falling fast. It was colder than the Devil's heart, raining iced pitchforks as if the heavens were ready to fall. I pulled my coat about my neck, buried my hands deep into the pockets. Everyone was running for shelter, like there was no tomorrow. The atmosphere didn't get any better when I reached the subway.

The feeling hit me like a point-blank shot straight in the face. Something was wrong with this scene. People were moving quickly, trying to stay warm, trying to keep ahead of the storm. My Beretta stirred nervously under my coat, but it was too late. The train doors rumbled shut behind me, and I was in for the ride. Next stop, Roscoe Street Station.

And Alex.



I reached Roscoe without any delay. No one but me wanted off at the station. I pushed passed a half dozen weary commuters, stepped onto the platform. The station was drenched in gloom and Alex was a ghost nowhere to be seen. I had thought he would meet me at the platform. I checked my watch, looked around. No one. The train rumbled away.

"Alex?"

My voice bounced around the empty station as if it were a tomb. A few steps toward the exit and I froze. The gates to the surface streets had been rolled across the walkway. I rushed up the steps. The locks were engaged.

“Alex?”

Nothing. What was going on here? If the station had been closed due to the storm the train wouldn't have stopped. There'd be some kind of warning, or alert...

I looked around. At the other end of the platform was a blue door marked **Maintenance**. It was ajar. Maybe there was a janitorial crew on duty here and they would let me out. I jogged over, rubbing my icy hands together for warmth.

“Hey, anyone home? I got locked in down here and...”

A trail of rust lead to the door. The smell hit me like a gun shot. I pushed the door open with my foot and followed the blood with my eyes. A uniformed man lay in a deeper pool of the red stuff, face down. His uniform read **Transit Police**.

I pushed into the maintenance closet, letting the door close behind me. The smell was stronger now. Death was in the air at Roscoe Street.

I knelt by the transit cop, feeling for a pulse, knowing I would come up empty. Stone cold. He was a big man, but I managed to lift his body to reveal three neat bullet holes in his chest. Professional. I would have to find Alex and fast.

My head snapped up. Voices were coming from the station. I crept to the door, which hadn't closed all the way, and tugged it open.

Two men now stood at the platform, guns in hand. The sheer brazen display of firepower another indicator of a professional operation.

“I swore I heard something—wasn't Jake supposed to take care of this?” one of the men said, a tight beanie wrapped around his skull. He was marching in place and rubbing his hands together.

“Nah,” the other man said slowly, cigarette dangling from his lip. “He and Mickey're having too much fun taking care of the cop up there. It's gonna be a slaughterhouse by the time they're done.”

“Great,” the beanie-head man said. “Who gets to clean that up?”

“Hell if I care,” the other spat. “As long as they do their damn job they can crucify the son-of-a-bitch.” He flicked his cigarette into the subway tracks.

“Damn, it's cold,” the beanie-head said, following the cigarette's blazing trail. “W-w-what's the friggin plan, anyway?”

The other laughed. “Simple, gun down every mother-loving bastard that gets off the train.”

“Sweet. But didn't the train go already?”

“No idea, let's just wait and see.”

As usual my timing was impeccable. I'd walked in on some big time crime operation with nothing but a smile and my service piece. And from my vantage point these guys were packing serious hardware. I could only guess what the boys upstairs had in store.

Still peering from the maintenance closet I noticed the thugs had unlocked the subway gate to the surface levels. Well, that was something.

I backed from the door, letting it close. This couldn't have been what B.B. wanted me to meet Alex for.

Alex?

Had he gotten caught up in this late night drama?

The distant metal-on-metal scream of an inbound train brought me back to the two hired guns blocking my escape. My only chance would be to take them by surprise, slip by as the train roared through the station. If the train was bound for Roscoe Street the thugs had promised to deliver Murder One in spades. My cold hand slipped into the holster under my leather jacket As I thought about the imminent carnage. Three years ago I would have called for back up, no risks. But that was then, and tonight was going down hard.

With any luck, so was the Valkyr case.

The train was screeching her approach, seconds away. Onboard, the packed carts were cattle trucks bound for slaughter. I cracked the door one last time—the noise masked by the squeals of rapid transit—and slipped from the maintenance closet.

“Here they come!” the beanie-headed murderer cried. The other said nothing but leveled a gun by his hip.

I sprinted and slipped behind a bench, crouching next to a tiled pillar. The two were close to the platform’s edge, beyond the yellow warning line. My gun went to beanie-head first.

Crunch!

I’d gotten too close to the trash can, the sound of leather and rubber sole crushing a soda can broke through the crescendo of the arriving train. There was no time to hide. Beanie-head was already spinning, gun drawn.

“What the Hell...?”

I still had the advantage. Two shots from the Beretta sent the skinny man spinning into his compadre, who was in the act of his own ungraceful pirouette. The beanie-head caught the other’s gun arm, knocking him backwards hard enough to send them both over the edge of the platform...

I turned away. The train had not been bound for Roscoe Street. Instead it hurtled by at full speed, where, upon reaching the next available station, the traumatized driver would report a horrific accident. The parts would be collected from here to Brighton Beach. The commuters, though inconvenienced on one of the coldest evenings of the year, were still be alive to file complaints to the MTA.

No time to lose—Alex could be anywhere in the station. In the gloom, something caught my eye—the cold glint of a Desert Eagle. One of Punchinello’s thugs had dropped it before catching his last train. I took the weapon, ejected the clip. Full mag. I slapped the clip back in place. At least now I had some backup.

The security gate stairs led up to a grimy tiled passageway decorated with peeling plastered posters and colorful graffiti. Several of the tags were all too familiar: hastily sprayed V-shapes, mile-markers on the road to Hell.

Half the lights were either broken or stuttering, casting uneasy shadows from trash and debris. A biting draft seemed to push me forward, wrapping around my legs, grasping at my hair, making the ragged bills flutter uneasily against the walls, as if trying to break free and flee this place of death.

I skidded to a halt before a T-junction, alerted by a noise. Around the next corner someone was half whispering, half yelling.

“Yo, guys, lemme in... Yo, guys? Hey! Quit kidding around, you hear me? What is this, a joke? Hey! *Anybody!* Answer me!”

Without risking having my head blown off it was impossible to tell where the impatient mobster was located. It sounded as if he was rattling another security gate. Maybe he was stuck on this side of the gate, maybe not. It didn’t matter, there was no way I was going to get past the junction and continue on without being seen. If I stayed low to the ground, however, there was a possibility of taking him by surprise...

BOOM!

Grout and tile rained down around my ears, forcing me to duck and cover. The reverberations traveled up my feet to my spine and for a terrible second I thought the ceiling was going to become my tomb.

The lights dimmed—those that still worked—then returned to normal. A few moments later I risked getting to my feet, brushing the dust and debris from my shoulders and hair.

Either someone was dropping bombs on New York, or the thugs upstairs were remodeling the station. Whatever the case I was no closer to finding Alex.

The raspy voice cried out again, no longer a whisper but a shrill report. “Forget this! Screw you guys!”

The echo of his footsteps grew fainter. The mobster made good on his word, giving up on the two men I’d help catch a train. After a moment, back pressed against the wall, I risked a look around the corner. Nothing, except another security gate to a closed section of the station. I continued past it, hoping my mobster encounters were over.

Naturally, I was wrong.

I hurried, feeling not for the first time that evening that time was not on my side. I couldn’t help but wonder what these guys would do if they found Alex before I did. I pushed the thought from my mind, buried it deep.

I hopped over a fallen trash can, Beretta in hand, feeling like a comic book cop or a hard boiled dick in some cheesy noir. Despite Hollywood, this wasn’t the way normal police work was done. Then again, this situation was well beyond the scope of *normal* police work. The dead transit cop had been testament to that. These guys were bold, well funded, organized—Punchinello’s men.

I descended some steps and found another platform. This one looked like a service line.

More voices, a dozen or so feet ahead. I slipped behind a pillar, back pressed to the cold tile. I held my breath, hands clasped around the gun, teeth clenched. I tasted blood.

“Hey, what was that?” a man squeaked, all nasal.

I listened from my hiding place, trying to piece together the scene. How many; were they armed; location...

“It’s nothin, relax.”

“Don’t tell me to relax!” the nasal-voice said. “We got half the freakin NYPD coming down on us any minute.”

“Yo, take it easy. It’s a cinch. We got the whole goddamned place on lockdown. Nobody’s gettin in or out.”

Two men, no doubt armed. Why they had the station on ice was a mystery to me. Unless the mobsters were making moves into the rapid transport business. This broken narrative was making little or no sense. Whatever else was happening at Roscoe, for Alex I had ended up in the middle of a big-time crime operation.

“Okay, okay,” one of the men said, not the nasal-voiced one. I realized he was talking on a cell phone, the other half of the conversation lost to me. “Yo, you still there? Boss? Goddamn cell phones.”

“What was that about, Frank?” the other squeaked.

“The boss. No witnesses.” Frank’s voice seemed to fade. I realized he was moving away. Within moments he was back, but now there was a third voice, a whimpering voice.

“Shall we?” Frank mumbled.

“Come on, let’s just do him here!”

There was a sound like tape being peeled back, and then the third man found his voice. “P-p-please, no don’t!”

The sound of a gun being cocked.

“Kiss it goodbye!” the nasal voiced man cried.

Powerless. That’s what I’d been the night my wife and baby daughter had been taken from me. *Murdered*. Powerless to save them from the cruelty of this fallen world, despite my best intentions.

Something hot began squirming in my brain, the faces of my dead loved ones were acid-stamped visages in my mind’s eye. The anger I’d been channeling into my DEA role as brass balls undercover work mutated into a new type of rage: a cold, calculated machine programed for vengeance. It was a numbers game, that was all. How long I could hold on was anyone’s guess.

I jumped out from behind the pillar, barrel rolled twice, arms outstretched before me with Justice in hand. Bad police work, but I wasn’t going to let another innocent to die tonight.

Two men, another on his knees. A transit cop, blue uniform covered in dirt and blood. The nasal-voiced man was staring down the sights of his weapon, which was pressed against the transit cop’s forehead. They didn’t even react to my presence.

Einstein had said everything was relative to the observer. Seconds were passing in ever expanding increments, until a minute became an hour, a day a lifetime...

My bullets found their targets. I had time to study the mobsters’ faces: their reaction to seeing me, all wide eyed and unbelieving. Then surprise turned to cold anger, then more surprise as the nine-millimeter rounds tore through leather jackets and flesh.

Then reality returned to real-time. The bodies hit the dirty tile like dropped rag dolls in fast forward. For a moment everything seemed too fast.

“W-who are you?”

I glanced at the transit cop, who was cowering on his knees, hands still above his head. A gear in my brain locked back into place, and I began to think again. “What’s going on here?”

The transit cop lowered his arms. “A massacre... These armed thugs just appeared out of nowhere. We need to get help. I can make the call from the control room, one floor up. Can you take me there? Cell phones aren’t worth a damn down here.”

I was busy fingering the bodies for clips. "Sure, sounds good. Follow me."

The uniformed man did as he was told, without question or hesitation. I reloaded the Beretta and continued through the door the mobsters had brought the transit cop through. "Up here?"

"Yeah, yeah, straight up these steps!" His uniform was soaked with sweat. I didn't see a wedding ring on his finger. I wondered what his plans had been for the evening, before *this*.

I nodded, steeling myself for what lay above. "What about the service cart," I said, nodding at the yellow car on the rails. "Can we use it? Where does it go?"

"No power, but I can juice it from the control room. It'll take us to the supply line, then on out to the materials depot."

Plan B if Alex remained a ghost. "Okay, let's go."

We double timed it up the stairs, hugging the piss-yellow tile like frightened rats. I couldn't hear any more voices, but that didn't mean there weren't more bad guys.

We were halfway up when the transit cop broke the silence with a nervous whisper. "How'd ya move like that?"

"What?" I asked, keeping my eyes forward and up.

"Back there... Damn, you took both those guys out before they got a chance to..."

"Shhh!" I pointed ahead to a pair of double doors, at the crest of the steps. "That it?"

The transit cop nodded, eyes wide and face damp. "The red light means it's locked. I've got the key code."

I reached the top step and poked my head around the corner to the adjacent corridor. It was in darkness, another security gate blocking the way. I saw no one and nodded.

The transit cop nodded back, emboldened by my presence. I watched as he scaled the steps to the control room and entered his magic number.

He turned back to me as the doors swished open. "Home free, come on, this way..."

My gun was already sighted on the first mobster's face, which disappeared behind a red mist as I squeezed the trigger. Another man tumbled out from the control room cradling a twelve-gauge. I fired two rounds into his chest, then one into his head. Professional.

"Oh no, oh damn, oh Jesus help me!"

My eyes focused. The transit cop was down. Blood was pooling on his uniform, turning the material a deep shade of purple.

I was at his side in an instant, looping my arms around his shoulders and dragging him through the doors. They hissed shut behind us.

The transit cop cried out in pain.

"It's okay," I said. I continued to drag the man's body to the control panels. "You're hit in the shoulder, apply pressure there."

The cop did as I said, no questions, no hesitation.

"G-g-gimme the p-phone!" he said. "I'll m-m-make the call."

I did just that, dropping the old fashioned rotary into his lap. "I need to get the power up on that service line. It's our way out of here."

“B-back room,” the transit cop sputtered, shaking fingers trying to dial a number.

I moved quickly, ignoring the bodies of other fallen transit police and technicians. The control room was a morgue. Pretty soon the whole station would be, too.

The back room door was marked **GRID** followed by a series of numbers and letters. I pushed through, finding more bodies. The small room was banked with CCTV displays of each platform line in the station. Most of them were dark.

A quick inspection of a large breaker board told me that the mobsters had done their homework. The breakers for most of the lines had been thrown. I reactivated the one for the service line and ran back to the control room.

The transit cop lay slumped over the phone. Gone. The last number he had ever dialed was marked with bloody fingerprints. The phone line was dead. I wanted to laugh. Of course it was dead. Why would the mobsters leave the lines up? But at least the power was back, and the service line would take me out of this gangster’s paradise.

Alex?

I had no choice, there was no other way out of the station, not now. Before my brain could hesitate my feet took me out of the control room and back down the stairs to the service line. The waiting car lit up like a Christmas tree. A single engine with no other rolling stock attached. It looked abandoned. I clambered aboard the battered yellow cart and hit a lever. Power surged through the steel frame as it began to groan forward.

Finally my brain caught up with my body. I had *no* idea how to control this thing. I hadn’t taken a second to familiarize myself with the controls. Where was the brake?

Too late. Something slammed against the front window, cracking the glass. Something else smashed through the roof. The headlights illuminated a wooden latticework across the track, dead ahead. A barricade.

It was too late to pull the brakes, even if I could find them. I dove to the floor and covered my head as the car hurtled through the blockade.

So much for being subtle.

Live From The Crime Scene

“Did you hear something?”

The cold of the engine’s deck seeped through my aching flesh and reached marrow. I lay there, shell shocked by the collision, momentarily dazed and blinded by the settling dust. I heard voices. The first was a straight Brooklyn rasp.

“They’re blowing the vaults to kingdom come, what did you expect, Pauly? It’s nothing. This dump’s been closed off for decades, stuff’s gonna move around a little.”

“They broke through?” a second voice asked.

“Hell if I know. They oughta have by now. Every freakin cop in New York’s coming down on us.”

There was a pause. From my position on the train’s floor I couldn’t tell if the two men were heading my way. My hand went for the Beretta.

“Come on, Pauly, let’s go back.” It was the Brooklyn rasp again. Closer this time. “It’s kinda spooky down here.”

“Not as spooky as Lupino’s been getting. You ain’t even been around the club lately, so you wouldn’t know. Hell, it’s like the failure count is rising..”

“I wouldn’t joke about it if I was you, Pauly! Say, do you remember this train being here?”

The gun was free from my jacket. I tried to get an angle on the door, the broken window; predict where the goons would come from...

“Who’s joking? Man, you should see some of the voodoo shit going down at Ragna!” They were right by the car now, I was sure of it.

A sharp burst of static erupted. My finger nearly squeezed off a shot, and I realized I was holding my breath. Dust began to tickle the back of my throat...

A walkie-talkie. I couldn’t make out the words through the static, but Pauly seemed to be the one to reply. “Yeah? Okay. Great. Okay.”

“What’s up?” Brooklyn finally asked, impatient.

“The station’s not secure. Someone decided to play hero upstairs!”

Brooklyn sighed. “Great. That’s all we need. Come on, Pauly.”

I heard footsteps retreating from my position. A long sigh of relief escaped my lungs.

Minutes passed. They felt like lifetimes. Each one I spent holding Michelle and the baby. Then something told me to get up, to move. I felt a spasm run down my right leg, but that was the worst of it. Nothing broken.

The crash had apparently killed the train’s headlights, probably saving my life from the snooping mobsters. In the interim my eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the gloomy service tunnel. I kicked open the door of the train and half-climbed half-fell out of the car. I landed on gravel and splintered wood. Not the best environment for ninja tactics. I paused a moment in case Pauly and his friend decided they were no longer afraid of ghosts. Nothing happened.

I stepped out of the rubble and onto the track. Somewhere ahead there would be a depot, the transit cop had promised me that much. But the mobsters hadn't gone too far, which meant there was another way.

I moistened the end of my index finger, raised it high. A definite draft raced forward into the utter pitch black oblivion of the tunnel.

As graceful as a gorilla in an ice rink I clambered my way over the debris of the blockade. Once my feet hit solid track I was able to look around, survey my cold, dark surroundings with a level of objectivity not afforded to me at gun point. The rails ran parallel to infinity, the ceiling lights dead stars in the night sky. This line hadn't been used in years, at least not consistently. Tools lay to my left: gas cylinders, blow torch, pickaxe. There was no platform, no tile, only crudely cut rock forming the Bronx's sub rosa rail networks.

The tools and materiel were my best bet. I followed the trail, finding a hastily cut arch into the rock. Whatever the goons had been doing they'd been specific. Beyond the broken rock lay steel walls. Then it hit me, the whole reason for this rapid transit takedown. One of the mobsters had said 'blowing the vaults'. I didn't know for sure, but my money was on the Roscoe Street Bank.

Only one way to know. I stepped over the threshold of rock and walked into—not for the last time—cold steel. A few more steps and I found myself standing in the middle of a bank vault. Metal security bars had been blowtorched, vault doors blackened and busted open. All around shiny yellow bricks were stacked high. But the gold looked largely untouched.

I continued out of the vault into what looked like a small lobby. Potted plants and chairs lined the walls—a high-class security deposit box waiting room. As I rounded another corner I saw the main entrance, a six inch thick metal door that was half-cracked open. A monologue was taking place over an alarm klaxon...

"Okay, fellas, listen up. The police are on their way... New York's finest are gonna be here any minute. Just stick to the plan. We've got our own private exit route. In and out, do your thing. Wham, bam, thank you ma'am. Let's finish this job."

Another voice joined him. "You heard the man, let's move, ya apes! Move it, move it!"

A flurry of footsteps followed. Within a minute the men were gone.

I peeked around the open door to what looked like another control room. The place was thoroughly trashed, papers strewn on the floor, furniture upturned. Several bodies littered the ground, security guys in uniforms.

I pushed through into the wide lobby, gun first. The alarm was deafening now. Several of the bodies were leaking claret, mixing with the papers that covered the floor. I knelt down and picked one up and it was suddenly clear why the gold was untouched. The bank robbers had been after Aesir corporation bonds. I wasn't surprised, the Aesir success story had recently been on every channel and on the cover of every magazine.

What did surprise me was the telephone. A phone on the desk was ringing. I barely noticed it above the alarms. An outside line. I could tell the cops everything that had gone down here, that it had been Lupino's men, Lupino's hit...

The receiver was already in my hands before my brain shut down that idea like a shot to my stomach.

"Hello?"

“We come to you now live from the crime scene...” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“Who is this?”

“Right back at you.”

The voice on the line growled. “This is Deputy Chief James Bravura from the NYPD. You are to cease your criminal activities and surrender immediately!”

“Sure thing, Jim. Me and the boys have been talking, and everyone’s real sorry. They’ll never do it again.”

The deputy chief exploded in my ear, “Who the *hell* is this?”

I hung up. Then I ripped the phone line out of the socket. Being placed at the scene of a bank robbery wouldn’t tip the odds in my favor. After all, I wasn’t Max Payne, DEA, I was Max Payne, undercover cop, in deep—too deep. I wasn’t ready to come in from the cold, not yet, not when I was this close. Three years of pushing V and following the dough, doing the Finitos’s dirty laundry. Three years of running underage prostitutes to the Don’s associates and brokering contract killings... No, I wasn’t about to play the fall guy for Jacky boy.

Panic took me. I circled the room like a caged animal until I found the mobsters’ ‘private exit’. Lupino’s goons had blown a section of a vault wall back through to what looked like old Roscoe Street Station. I quickly moved through, following the men until I reached yet another barred gate. This wasn’t right. I needed to look for another route.

“Hold it right there!”

I froze, then spun around. Someone was behind the security gate, gun leveled at my chest.

“Max? Goddamn, you almost gave me a heart attack! I almost shot you!”

My feet moved me to the gate in slow motion. “A-Alex? Am I glad to see you.”

“What the hell’s going on here, Max? There are more corpses here than at the city morgue!”

I shook my head, trying to fit the pieces together in some communicable fashion. “It’s an armed robbery, Alex. A tunnel job straight to the Roscoe Bank Vault, through the old station wall. Is this why you wanted to see me?”

Alex’s eyes were wide. “See you? Wait a minute, Max, this is Lupino’s gig? This is Lupino’s doing? Lupino’s men? You knew this was going down?”

“You sure know how to pick a place,” I said, feeling time draining away. “No, I wasn’t in on this. Listen, NYPD’s about to bust this whole place open. I can’t be found here, Alex. Can you get through?”

Alex inspected the gate before kicking it in frustration. “No, it’s locked. We gotta get outta here, Max!”

“My sentiments exactly. Listen, Alex, go back the way you came, I’ll follow Lupino’s men out their escape...”

Alex’s head snapped violently. He collapsed to his knees, already dead. I could tell by the empty accusing stare of his eyes.

“Alex? Alex!”

The gunshot had come from somewhere behind him, around the corner. I couldn't see who had taken the shot, but at that moment I would have ripped the security gate in half to get to the killer. Then voices were rushing towards me and I was back in the game. I couldn't be found here, not now. For Michelle, for my baby daughter.... Now for Alex.

"Let's get the hell outta here!"

More mobsters were heading my way, left behind in the carnage and confusion. If they knew the escape route I would have to follow them. I hid behind a large trash can, gun loaded and ready.

"We'll be fine, just take it easy!" another yelled.

"But I'm allergic to sirens!"

Two men raced by the security gate. They headed down the corridor and through an unmarked door. If that was the only way out I'd have to take it.

I got to my feet and ran.

Playing It Bogart

There was a break in the snow storm, though for how long was anyone's guess. I emerged from a back alley, careful to watch for any lingering mob-types. Seeing no one I ran away from the sound of sirens, numb to the cold, numb inside.

Alex had kept me relatively sane for the past three years. Now I didn't know how I felt. Somehow he'd stumbled upon something big, stepping on Jack Lupino's toes to in the process.

My stomach growled. I wasn't hungry but I couldn't remember the last meal I'd had, so I walked and walked until I found a Bronx dive unfriendly to cops. Inside I grabbed coffee, donuts. The girl at the counter gave me a funny look, like I'd been up all night robbing banks.

In the corner booth I sat and munched, sipping the bad joe and feeling the bruises I'd picked up from Roscoe. I was forming my game plan, going over the lines play by play. The radio on the counter choked out a tinny rock and roll number, breaking at the top of the hour for a news roll. I listened without being too obvious, the girl giving me the evil eye throughout.

"...In his press conference today, the Mayor stated that Valkyr represents a clear danger to New York, and called for drastic actions to eliminate the problem. On today's top story, the Valkyr crisis worsens with the murder of DEA Special Agent Alex Balder during a spectacular heist at the Roscoe Street Bank. Special Agent Balder was shot repeatedly from a point blank range. The gunman has been identified as Max Payne..."

I felt hot liquid on my fingers. I tried to stop my hand from shaking, finally placing the cup on the table. Still the girl eyed me. I had just gotten my fifteen minutes of fame, grateful the news wasn't a TV report special, my face plastered on the screen for anyone to see. I tried to calm my mind, to focus my thoughts...

I retraced the report in my mind. The details to this dirty noir had been expertly distorted. Alex hadn't been shot repeatedly, and no one had seen me escape Roscoe. That meant Lupino had a rat at the news network, or someone was feeding them false info. Either way, Lupino was pinning the bank job and Alex's death on me, which meant my cover had been blown.

Or had it? Maybe someone else was working against me, against our Valkyr case. Either way I had to know, and only one man had the answer.

I left my half eaten donut on the table and walked out. The girl never took her eyes off me.



Jack Lupino ran his racket of sex, drugs and contract killings from a sleazy hotel and a slum block of tenements. The place was operated by a couple of murdering mobsters with shark smiles: The Finito Brothers, Joey and Virgilio. I'd spent enough time here in the past three years that my face was well known to all concerned.

You could say I was a regular.

It was here most of the V-deals went down, where Alex and I had taken great pains to get me to.

I was taking alleys and keeping to darkened store fronts, my collar pulled up around my face, hands buried deep in my pockets. The NYPD was closing in. I could hear the sirens. Their wail was a crescendo that rattled my mind and set my teeth on edge.

Lupino thought he could get us off his back by taking Alex out, and leaving me to take the fall for it. All the bastard had gotten was my attention. I walked into the lion's den, gun loaded and safety off. I was in no mood to deal with anyone but Lupino himself.

I went for the hotel first. It was a sad old relic from the fifties, all flickering lamps and faded colors, cheap mobster punks, strung out V-heads and tired-eyed prostitutes. I walked straight in, playing it bogart, like I'd done a hundred times before.

I was surprised to find the Finito brothers waiting for me in the lobby. I resisted the urge to go straight for my gun.

"Ladies an' gentlemen, it's the pain in the butt," Joey Finito announced, arms wide.

"Pain to the Max!" Virgilio added, smiling. Their cheap suits and fedoras clashed with offensive color schemes, gold watches and diamonds, Old Spice and vomit filling the air.

"You're killing me," I muttered. "Did you make that up yourselves or did you get some wino downstairs to come up with it?"

The Finito brothers looked at each other, confused.

"Don't answer that," I added. "A rhetorical question. I've got something for the boss, is Lupino around?"

Joey began to laugh as if now getting the joke. "Ha. Yeah, he's around. Right this way." He pointed up the stairs and I followed Virgilio, Joey taking rear. We passed faded wallpaper and stained carpet, cigarette butts littering the floor like burnt confetti from a wedding in Hell. We reached a double set of heavy wooden doors, the Finito's private office. I walked in, like nothing had happened, like I was the one in control of the whole situation, like I had nothing to lose.

Joey and Virgilio locked the door and went to their desk, poured themselves drinks. Something was hysterically funny to them, I could see it on their faces. That's when I began to worry that not everything was Bogart.

I took the initiative, not enjoying being the butt of some private joke. "Where's Lupino? I don't have time to dick around with you two knuckleheads."

Joey took a drink and laughed out loud. Then his face grew serious. "That kinda depends on who's askin, don't it? A friend, or a junk squad plant!"

I felt my fingers twitch.

"But don't answer..." Joey continued. "It's one of them, how'd you put it...? *Rhetorical questions.*"

Virgilio moved next to his brother, eyes dark. "Lupino ain't here, asshole, but he says 'bye!'"

I'd gambled, and lost. Lupino wasn't in his cheap hotel. Instead, I had the Finito brother's as a consolation prize. Then I was dodging bullets like raindrops.

Joey and Virgilio turned over their desk, pulling their pieces, laughing hysterically. The joke was on me.

"Pain in the butt, ha ha, pain to the Max!" Joey shrilled.

I dove for cover as the first few rounds began to fly through the office.

“Junk squad pig!” Virgilio said “Got a ticket to marble city for ya, feet first and lyin down!”

I rolled behind an old settee as bullets burst upholstery into foam confetti. I still had the Desert Eagle I’d lifted from the mobsters at Roscoe. I pulled the weapon from my jacket along with the Beretta. I waited for a pause in the action as the brothers Grimm began reloading.

In one movement I simultaneously toppled the peppered couch and leapt over it. It was a ballsy move but I had no chance taking these guys one on one. Virgilio and Joey looked startled, and then they were falling, tumbling backwards. I’d let both guns do the talking, one for each Finito. Time did that squishy thing again, each heartbeat stretching to an epoch.

Then it was over.

I walked over to the bodies, checked for pulses. They were both dead. I couldn’t say I was sorry, but the act of murder left me cold inside. Then my brain took over and I quickly tore through their pockets looking for some kind of clue, some way they had discovered and blown my cover. I wasn’t deluding myself, the Finitos were too dumb to have figured it out all by themselves.

A blood stained note appeared in my hand, torn from Joey’s breast pocket. I opened the letter to find the familiar scrawl of Vinnie Gognitti, Lupino’s right hand man. I had met Jack Lupino only once during my tenure in organized crime. The gangster ran his rackets through Gognitti, a high-strung whiner on the verge of breaking apart, like an over-amped Energizer bunny on crack. He had the brains to run the business but he lacked the balls, always falling short, taking his frustration out on under-aged addicts and call girls.

The V-deal goes down at the hotel. Jack’s exact words, quote: ‘Vinnie, you’re in charge of this one’, unquote. Rico Muerte’s coming to see it through personally. Anything goes wrong, everyone gets dead. Goes double for you. Treat this guy real good. Anything he wants, you give him. Don’t screw this up or you’re finito, Finitos.

A V-deal at the hotel meant added security, locked doors, and lots of nervous thugs with itchy trigger-fingers. I had seen nothing coming in, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t been here.

I was surprised to see Muerte’s name in the letter. I’d never met the man; few people had. Rico Muerte was a regular Keyser Soze, a spook story told to keep the apes in line. Word was he’d been hiding in Chicago for years. Until now, I’d guessed he wasn’t real.

313. The Finitos had scribbled Muerte’s room number on the note’s margin.

I reloaded the Eagle and the Beretta. I’d taken a big risk coming to the Hotel, and I wasn’t about to walk away empty handed. Lupino or no Lupino, I wanted answers.

It was time to pay Muerte a visit.



Getting out of the Finitos’ lair wasn’t easy. The stairwell fire escape was locked and the elevator had been busted for a decade or more. The only way down was the way I’d come with the Finitos, which meant I’d be playing hide-and-seek with Lupino’s men. I trod carefully, guns ready.

A couple of guys were waiting for me at the bottom of the 3rd floor stair. They were covered in more tattoos than skin, long greasy hair masking their eyes, faces covered in sores and scabs. Career V-heads, junkies that could go off without warning, eat the face off a man or shoot up an entire room. I felt the familiar rage, but I had to be careful, avoid eye contact, resist the urge to kill them in cold blood. V-heads had taken my wife, my daughter, everything..

I held the rage inside and kept moving.

Room 313 was easy enough to find. The closed door was unremarkable. Maybe it was the V-heads, maybe the loss of Alex, I didn't know for sure, but I went in gun first, ready to make Muerte pay, make him tell me where Lupino was and *where* the V was coming from.

I kicked open the door. Instead of Muerte I saw a chair with a shotgun aimed at my face, a rope tied around the trigger and something moving to my right. Instinct caused me to dive as a cloud of buckshot blasted by my ear, shaving my leather jacket.

"Shit!" I yelled involuntarily. I didn't have time to check the wound, I dove into the room and covered the corners, spinning from wall to wall until I was sure the room was empty.

I closed the door, certain the shot had been heard by someone. Sure, random gunshots were not out of the ordinary in Lupino's Paradise Plaza, but this was no ordinary night. I covered the door with the guns until I was sure no one was coming. Then the pain started.

I'd taken some buckshot to the arm, nothing serious but enough to leave a sting. I quickly checked the bedroom and bathroom for signs of life before ripping open the bathroom cabinet. Nothing but cheap aspirin and rubbers lay inside.

I took the aspirin.

I gulped several down, dry swallowing the pills. In the background I heard the TV rambling away to itself, and realized it had been on this whole time.

I moved back into the living room, admiring Muerte's rigged shotgun. Using a series of ropes and weights the goon had fashioned a death trap. When the door opened the trigger was pulled. Clever. If I'd walked into the room instead of kicking down the door money was I'd have been sawn in half. I picked the shotgun up, admired the raw power and pumped new rounds into the chamber while the news lady began to make me feel all queasy inside...

"Tonight, the City's fight against the nightmare drug, Valkyr, took a turn for the worst, as DEA Special Agent Alex Balder was found brutally slain at the Roscoe Street Subway Station. Sources say a suspect was seen leaving the site only moments after the shots had been fired, and the NYPD is currently in pursuit of Max Payne, a repeated felon, believed to be armed and extremely dangerous. And now the weather. The worst winter storm in recorded history continues to pound the city..."

The words faded away. I wanted to blast the TV with the shotgun, but didn't. Instead, I shut the idiot box off and made to leave. On my way out I saw a hand written letter on the desk piled high with old syringes of V and dried blood. The letter had been signed by the Don himself, Angelo PUNCHINELLO, head of the PUNCHINELLO family. In three years our investigation had turned up nothing to link the Don to Valkyr. All tracks had ended with Jack Lupino. This letter was the first hint that the kingpin knew what was brewing inside his syndicate. I skipped to the juicy parts.

...The trouble you got into after the Chicago screw-up, the PUNCHINELLO family bailed you out. You have been waiting for a chance to pay us back. Here's your chance, Rico. One of our trusted boys has a monkey the size of King Kong on his back. We need you to come to New York to lend us your special skills for backup on a major deal...

My hand snapped closed, crumpling the letter into a ball. I tossed it away. In light of the evening's events collecting evidence had gotten old several shoot-outs ago. The Roscoe incident, Alex, the bank robbery, and now the Finito brothers... I was already so far past the point of no return I couldn't remember what it had looked like when I'd passed it.

No Lupino, now no Muerte. I was at a loss. Things weren't going as planned. Then again, life rarely works the way we expect.

A book, half buried under the mound of needles and bloody tissues, caught my eye. The pink cover and hearts didn't jive well in this macabre setting. I opened the first page where the words **Candy's Diary** were scribbled in pink ink. Candy Dawn was a regular feature at the hotel, a high class hooker usually reserved for special guests. She'd obviously been keeping Muerte copacetic during his New York visit.

I flipped to the most recent entries. The read would have made a vice cop blush.

...Had talks with the mystery hag over the phone again. Sent her the latest 'One-Eyed Alfred' tape. He's boring as hell, but I don't mind. As long as the hag keeps paying for the tapes, the old man could come every day for all I care...

Candy had a nice sideline. Making X-rated flicks of her clients and selling them to the highest bidder. It would get her killed, if her V-fix for the day didn't do it first. But who was I to judge? More than likely, before the night was through, I would be taking a one way trip to marble city, just as the Finitos had promised.

The Blood Veins Of New York

I'd found an old service elevator, one that actually worked, and took it down to the bowels of Jack Lupino's hotel. I didn't have a plan, but I didn't feel like leaving until I had some hard reason behind Alex's murder. As the noisy cage descended I heard Michelle's voice in my head, accusing me of being stubborn, telling me to let it go, walk away.

The doors opened.

"Who the hell are you?"

I should have expected this. A man with a gun pointed at my nose was doing the asking. Obviously he hadn't been watching the local news or I'd be dead, no questions asked.

"Easy," I said, "I'm one of Muerte's guys, here for the V-deal." It was a huge gamble, but I had nothing to lose.

The mobster lowered his gun. "That so? Well don't freakin be coming down here scaring the shit outta me like that. We got enough heat without Muerte's guys running around like they own the place, capisci?"

I nodded. "Lupino around?"

The mobster laughed, but lowered his gun. "Freakin Lupino, no he ain't around in the basement, whaddya think, wise guy?"

"Hell of a deal back at Roscoe," I tried, wanting to smooth the interaction.

The mobster nodded, stuffing his gun in his pants between his belt. "It was freakin' crazy. The cops were doin' a full-scale siege next door. More traffic than rush hour. I mean bleeding bastards running back and forth..."

"Intense," I said.

The mobster shrugged. "I was right in the middle of it, the whole mess, there I was. I didn't give a damn. Just goin with the flow."

"So what happened?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "Nothin happened. We got the explosives, dumped the cargo. We was home free!"

I smiled. "What say we grab a couple of cold ones at the bar, on me?"

The mobster looked at me. "Why not? Robbing banks's thirsty work."

As he stepped into the elevator his back was to me. I drew the Eagle and pistol-whipped the back of his skull. He dropped like a bag of rocks.

"Enjoy the hangover."

I dragged his unconscious body from the service elevator, hitting the button for the roof as I did. The doors began to slide shut but I held them fast. The old elevator trundled upward, leaving the space of the shaft accessible. I threw the mobster's limp body into the space where he fell several feet to the bottom. It wasn't a long drop, and the elevator wouldn't crush him if he stayed low, but he'd have a hell of a time getting out.

Job done, I let the doors rumble shut.

The basement was a maze of old boilers and furnaces, tangled with outdated electrical grids, bad plumbing and the worst bug infestation I'd ever seen. A bank of small windows gave me a view to the dark street above, snowed almost to the tops of the sill. We'd been snowed from the start in the Valkyr case, and the forecast had said there was plenty more where that had come from. I was glad. The snowbound City was on my side. With everyone running for shelter like there was no tomorrow, there'd be less chance of innocent bystanders getting caught in the crossfire.

It didn't take me long to find the main furnace room. I hadn't spent much time down in the basement while undercover, and I was beginning to consider myself lucky. A dead man lay in a pool of his blood, tied to a chair on the boiler room floor. The murder weapon was a baseball bat, now lying in a puddle of drying blood, next to a newspaper folded open on a Captain Baseball Bat Boy comic strip. I wanted to laugh. I didn't. Forced myself not to. I was worried that if I started I wouldn't be able to stop.

The furnace was roaring at full-capacity. I wondered how many victims had been disposed of in that makeshift crematorium. Dozens? Hundreds? I didn't want to wait to find out.

I crept across the room, careful not to step in the blood now draining into the sewage system through a grill. The nightmare of Lupino's hotel was beginning to seep into my soul, soiling me to the core, and I was sure I wasn't going to be able to rinse the memories of this place away.

Up the concrete steps to a door. I placed my ear against it and listened.

"...Like in vampire movies. Why they always set in L.A. or Mexico? Suckers can't even get a tan. If I was a bloodsucker, I'd move to the North Pole, where winter's one long night."

"Yeah, but what would you eat? Suck blood from Penguins?" another voice asked.

"Nah," the first replied. "Eskimos, man. Eskimos."

It was becoming obvious that neither Lupino or Muerte were down here in the dungeon. Muerte at least still had to be around; where was anyone's guess. I thought about going back to room 313 to wait for him, but something about that plan didn't feel proactive enough. Alex had been murdered only hours before, and if Rico Muerte had anything to do with it I wanted to know now, not wait for it to show up on the 11 o'clock news.

The only place I hadn't searched was the bar and restaurant. It was a slim chance but better than no chance at all.

I took the stairs back up to the lobby. If anything big was going down I still saw nothing to indicate a deal. A couple of V-heads loitered in the hall. I kept my distance.

I'd spent time at the bar, schmoozing with leg-breakers and mad-dog-killers alike, sharing colds ones with the worst the City had to offer. The depth and complexity of the human soul never ceased to amaze me. How a man can knock back a beer one moment, crack jokes, hack up victims the next.

I followed the stained rug to the bar, passing the old lounge double doors and catching raised voices within. I'd done so much eaves dropping already tonight my ears were raw and tuned to the words.

"Share the guns. Trust me, you don't want to piss Muerte off!"

"Okay, gentlemen, let's do business. Green for green."

"Tears of green-eyed angels!"

"Amen."

Green for V. Green for money. I couldn't tell who was saying what, and I didn't recognize any of the voices. I imaged the table full of dirty money stuffed in briefcases, glowing cylinders of refined V ready for public consumption. The idea of busting through the door, guns blazing, was an attractive proposition given my current mood, but there were no guarantees Muerte was in there, and the likelihood of catching a slug in the dome for my trouble was favorable. A lifetime ago I would have called it in, gotten backup, and this would have gone down as a narcotics arrest.

Some of the V-heads in the hall were beginning to notice my loitering. I moved on.

The bar entrance was all tacky neon and stale beer mixed with sweat and drug-induced fever-stench. Squalid V-paraphernalia lay everywhere.

Two voices beyond the ajar doors, and a peep show thrown in for good measure. Candy Dawn and a fat looking Italian that had to be Muerte behind the bar. Candy, true to form in the act of giving, was moaning her appreciation of Muerte's monologue.

"Two mad dog killers, ready to murder each other. They step into the next room, and I'm thinkin, now they gonna do it!"

Candy groaned, disappearing completely behind the bar at Rico's feet.

"But no," Muerte continued, "they sit down in front of a TV and solve their differences with a kung-fu fightin video game. I tell you, Candy, I was so depressed I strangled them both with the video game cables."

Candy suspended her action for a moment. "Oh, Rico, you're so bad!"

I watched Muerte smile. "I am, ain't I?"

I couldn't watch any more. The desire to wipe the fat man's shit-eating grin off his face became intolerable. I kicked open the doors, pulling the shotgun from under my leather jacket.

Candy and Muerte jerked back into the bottles of spirits.

"Rico Muerte, big-time hustler," I deadpanned. "Caught you with your pants down."

Muerte's face exploded in anger, cheeks wobbling. "Who the hell?"

"It's that cop!" Candy yelled, obviously privy to my cover being blown. What didn't the hooker know?

Muerte went for his gun, but his pants snagged around his ankles. He stumbled from behind the bar and fell face first onto a pile of cigarette butts and stale peanuts. His own shotgun was at his head a second later. "Tell me what you know about Alex."

"...The hell are you?" Muerte spat.

"The guy with the gun to your head asking the questions, now talk."

"You're dead, cop. You hearing me? Do you know who I am?"

"Sure. The guy who botched the Chicago job. Punchinello's lap dog." I kept one eye on Muerte, one on Candy, who cowered in the corner of the bar.

"Rico!" she cried.

"Rico, you're going soft on me, big boy," I said.

Muerte licked his fat red lips, hands wide on the floor. He was beginning to sweat under his own weight. "I dunno nothin about no cop."

“I didn’t say Alex was a cop.” I pushed the shotgun harder into Muerte’s skull.

“Screw you, I ain’t implicating myself for no pig!”

I quickly realized I didn’t know where I was going with this line of inquiry. “The bank job, the V-deal. Aesir corp bonds? We’ve got you tagged to a half dozen murders, you’re already implicated, Muerte. Who killed Alex Balder?”

Something hit the back of my head. I’d taken my eye off Candy too long, and a bottle of liquor half brained me. I staggered across the floor, dropping the shotgun and watching it roll under a table. I reached for my Beretta, the Eagle too. Instinct told me to go straight for Muerte. I spun in mid air as my seat landed on the bar’s floor, both guns drawn and locked on Rico Muerte’s face. My instincts proved accurate, as Muerte’s own gun had appeared, a nasty looking Uzi with enough bullets to turn my body into ragged chunks of meat.

I put two in the Muerte’s head to the backdrop of Candy’s screams. Then Candy wasn’t screaming any more. Her body slumped to the floor amongst old V-syringes and broken bottles of liquor.

I wanted to scream myself. Instead I put my guns away and picked up the shotgun. Two more thugs burst through the bar’s back door as I got to my feet. I didn’t wait to discuss the situation with them. I raised the shotgun and blew the first guy away, direct hit to the chest. The other fired off a round and then he was lunchmeat.

There wasn’t time to assess what had happened. I was in deeper than I’d ever thought imaginable. I squeezed by the dead thugs and ran out the bar’s back entrance. The corridor connected to a staff entrance back to the main lobby. Lupino’s men would be on me any minute.

As I ran I noticed the antique switchboard behind the clerk’s desk, still in use. I slipped behind the front desk and into the back room, my last hope of gaining something worth while from this escapade quickly fading.

I put on the headphones. The switchboard was the kind that made phone tapping child's play. It wasn't hard to picture a fat pimp sweating with headphones on, listening to his hookers talk dirty and fake orgasms over the web of party lines; the blood veins of New York. Right now, there was a different set of moans and groans going on...

“...Boss... Gognitti? It’s Max Payne. He’s here... He started cappin us... He killed the bosses... Uhhh...”

Suddenly Gognitti’s voice screamed down the line. “Are you freakin kiddin me? He’s just one lousy cop! You better be freakin kiddin me! Whack him! What’s the freakin problem? Hello? Answer me! Hello?”

The word was out. A deadly virus had been released into the City’s diseased circulatory system. Something wicked this way comes. Max Payne at large.

I dropped the headphones and tore from the building and into the freezing night.

Let The Gun Do The Talking

Michelle's voice in my head again, persistent, telling me to turn around, walk away, blow town. That would have been the smart thing to do. Guess I wasn't that smart.

The hotel was a bust, but with Muerte and the Finitos gone the rest of Lupino's goons would be running scared, and Gognitti would be having a meltdown.

Despite what had transcended, my best bet was still a heart-to-heart with Jacky boy. In retrospect, it had been stupid to think that Lupino would be around for the bank job or the V-deal. It wasn't his style; why go out on a limb when it was easier to pull the strings from the center of your web?

It was several blocks to Lupino's next hideout. I trudged through the snow, giving the freezing air my full attention. After the rancid humidity of the hotel the cold night air felt like an injection of life.

On the way I passed a newsstand. The headlines were a depressing read, screaming bloody murder about the bank job and Roscoe and Alex... The snow storm was a screaming duet with the approaching prowling car sirens. It was all a scream when you were down for the count and wanted for murder. I continued on into the night, ignoring the growing swell of voices clamoring for attention.



Lupino's tenement buildings were a seedy hangout for all kinds of filth and sleaze. A liquor store, a pawn shop, a laundromat full of mobster bookies and loan sharks. The list went on.

The how and why of it remained a mystery to me, but somehow they knew I was a cop. They knew I was coming, and they were going to get real trigger-happy about it.

To my surprise I got to see Lupino's hangout all lit up. A pillar of fire lifted the remains of a car straight up into the air. I fell to the ground, covered my head as the debris rained down. The flames blazed brightly on the hood of a black Mercedes-Benz as it coasted down the street, real slowly, as if the driver didn't have a care in the world. I got a good look at the man riding shotgun. Vladimir, the head of the local Russian Mob and fly in Don Punchinello's soup.

The ringing in my ears was the sound of a mob war being waged. Another bomb exploded inside the closest slum building. It was a lucky break. The goons inside were spooked, but luck always came with a price tag. More bombs could still be ticking inside, and the cops would already be on their way. Jack Lupino's suite was on the top floor—at least it used to be, before the explosive makeover.

The building began to tear itself apart. Fire was spreading within. The whole block seemed rigged with explosives, and it was impossible to tell how many remained.

I watched to see what the goons would do, and if Lupino would come running from his lair. A pay phone next to me began to ring, the sound jarring in the aftermath of the explosions. I spun around in paranoid suspicion, feeling watched. The phone call could have been a junkie in need of a fix, but it turned out to be something more sinister than that.

I picked up the receiver, still glancing around for who could be watching me. "Yeah?"

"Am I speaking with Mister Payne?" The voice was dry, refined, ivy-league educated.

"Who wants to know?"

"My name is Alfred Woden. You must hurry, the police are on their way."

Still no one running from the building. Lupino's thugs were either well trained or they were all dead. Smoke was beginning to billow from the upper windows.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"They know you're there."

Suddenly my full attention was on the voice on the line. "How? And what's it to you?"

There was a pause and I thought the line had died. *"I will contact you again."*

The cops arrived, sirens singing in the off-key harmony of a manic-depressive choir. I had a few minutes while the SWAT team would go through their usual routine. It was already too late to run away on foot, the cops would have the streets blocked. My only chance was escape by adjoining rooftops, which meant going inside Lupino's flats.

I burst through the main door and into the lobby. Smoke hadn't found this area yet but it was only a matter of time, and the upper levels would already be filled. The power was out, but I had a general knowledge of the slum's layout.

I reached a locked fire door and kicked at it. Lupino's tenements were just as old and decrepit as the hotel, if not worse. I could only guess at how many state and City inspectors he'd paid off to keep this racket going. The rusty hinges crumbled off the wall and I was able to get through. Beyond there were V-heads, spooked by the explosions, shambling in the dark.

"The flesh, the flesh," one repeated, right out of a horror movie. "The flesh of fallen angels!"

I didn't know what that meant and I didn't have time to ask. I ran past them, shotgun ready for any trouble, pretending I knew what I was doing. I was on the ground floor: bombs, fires, and V-heads. Top floor: Jack Lupino, or at least a way to escape jail time without bail.

The back room next to the stairs was the super's office. The master key would be in there, and I'd need that for any door still standing between here and Lupino's suite. The wooden door was already open, and no one was inside to spook me. I found the key hanging on the wall, and some extra rounds for the shotgun. Someone had left a letter on the counter, and suddenly it all made sense. The bombs, the Russian mob boss making an appearance in person.

...After our hit the Russian has only a couple of guns left, and they can be bought. There's no freakin way he was the guts to try anything after that...

Gognitti was his usual self, all talk and no walk. As it turned out, the Russian had plenty of guts. One thing you could count on, you push a man too far, sooner or later he'd start pushing back. My bet was Gognitti knew damn well the Russian would retaliate in force, and had gone into hiding as a result. Say what you want about Vinnie, he had a talent for self-preservation.

From somewhere outside came a familiar voice via loudspeaker. *"Max Payne, this is Deputy Chief James Bravura from the NYPD. Drop your weapons and come out with your hands above your head!"*

Woden had been right, they did know I was here. I threw the key in the air, snatched it with one hand and pocketed it. One thing was certain, Vinnie Gognitti's talents would be put to the test tonight.

Fear That Gives Men Wings

The tenement was a crumbling mess. Vlad's explosive redesign had left stairwells twisted, windows shattered, walls ready to cave in.

The Russian bombs had destroyed all the stairs up to Lupino's office. The alternate route led there by way of adjoining rooftops, which meant heading through the gangster infested laundromat. Who knows, maybe the goons had all fled, spooked by the bombs. It was a nice idea.

An empty apartment was my ticket out of Lupino's Palazzo. I smashed open the kitchen window and hopped out onto the fire escape. The freezing wind bit into my face, clawing at my eyes, the storm a wild monster wrestling with me five floors above a white wasteland of an icy courtyard.

I began my descent, throwing the shotgun down into the snow. The fire escape's ladder wouldn't extend through its decades of rust, so I had to jump the last six feet. The snow helped break the fall.

I collected the late Rico Muerte's shotty with frozen fingers as stiff as his were by now and trudged through the drift. Ahead, two bums stood around a barrel, fire blazing, oblivious to my actions beyond the dome of light and warmth.

"It's never been this cold, man. Never ever. It's like... Like the sky's falling in, man!"

"Yes, sir. It's the end of the world as we know it!" the other mumbled.

"Yeah, and I don't feel fine. I don't feel anything, not anything."

I ignored them and headed toward the the laundry. To get to the roof I'd need to get to the elevator inside the laundromat. As luck would have it, the door was locked.

Suddenly a compartment slid open, revealing two eyes. "Who's there?"

"Pizza delivery," I ad libbed.

The eyes stared at me, piercing. "Never seen you before. Buzz off, joker!"

Dead end. I wasn't getting in through the front entrance, and there was no way to backtrack out of the courtyard, not with the broken fire escape and the police in the building next door. I thought about trying to shoot my way in, decided against it. The door was a solid metal type with reinforced hinges, the kind used when your laundry was washing more than clothes, and the sub rosa shenanigans meant potential police raid.

I wandered back out to the courtyard. The bums were still warming their buns by the fire, and I realized they could be useful.

"What do you want, man?" one of them said when I approached. I had the shotgun in my hand but lowered.

"Either of you know the clowns at the Laundry?"

The bums looked at each other. "Us? No..."

I didn't have time for this. I raised the gun. "You're no good to me then!"

The two put their hands up. One of the bums pleaded, "What? No, no, no, the *Laundry*, yeah, I know em, yeah, sure."

I indicated with the weapon to get moving. "Get me in there."

“Ok, ok, ok!” he said and shambled off toward the door. I followed, waiting behind the wall and out of sight.

The bum rapped his knuckles on the door. The hatch slid open again. “Yeah? What do you want?”

The bum hesitated for a second. “It’s me, uh, open up. Lemme in, quick!”

“Not so fast,” the man behind the door said. “The password... John who?”

Seconds passed and the bum seemed to be searching his brain for the answer. “Come on, man... All right. John *Woo*.”

To my relief the door opened. The thug behind it stepping aside. “All right, come right in.”

Suddenly the bum was screaming, and I was running.

“It’s a trap, it’s Payne!”

I launched myself at the door as it began to shut. The metal frame crashed open, smashing the doorman in the face giving his nose to a whole new look. He collapsed to the floor, unconscious. The bum ran. I let him go, concerned only with the elevator.

Banks of noisy washers and dryers hammered away, the place stank like socks and cheap detergent.

A card table was stacked with chips, guns, money. The walls were plastered with posters of girls in bikinis, their tan skin faded and peeling in the humidity.

A tiny black and white TV mumbled away to itself. Kyra Silver was all smiles and forced concern as she read the headlines. I turned up the noise and listened in.

“New York City is in crisis tonight, with reports of Valkyr related gang war in the streets of the Bronx. It appears that Max Payne, wanted for questioning in connection with the slaying of a DEA Special Agent earlier tonight, is waging a one man war against his former partners in crime. Among the listed casualties so far are notorious Mafia members, Joey and Virgillio Finito, as well as Rico Muerte, himself a fugitive from the law and a suspect for several murders in the Chicago area. The NYPD has been placed on full alert. A citywide APB has been put out on Max Payne. Deputy Chief James Bravura has promised to take whatever steps necessary to bring him to justice. What those steps may be remains to be seen. For NYCNN TV News, this is Kyra Silver.”

Jim was out there now, career on the line, all cameras on him and his department. I wasn’t making life easy for the deputy chief, I knew that.

The elevator door opened on the first try. I got in, trying to think ahead, plan my mistakes. The doors rumbled shut and I felt the cage begin to rise.



“What the hell you standin around here for? They’re bombin us! What are you doin? Nothin! What are you doin? This is war, freakin war!”

I knew the voice, but it wasn’t Lupino’s.

I’d made it to the upper levels of the tenement block, bypassing the stairs. Now the only way out for the thugs was through me and the elevator, or risk spelunking over rooftops.

I was in a run down suite, reserved for the loan-shark guys and the illegal gambling den. It was full of bad art and cheap furniture, the smell of hard liquor and rancid cologne stinging the back of my throat. I kicked open the door to the next room with all the fury of an enraged velociraptor robbed of her eggs. Vinnie Gognitti looked as if he'd seen his own death via premonition.

"Vinnie Gognitti," I said, "just the man I've been killing to see."

Gognitti found his balls. "Payne? Freakin Fed! I knew from day one there was somethin screwy about you! What do you think you're doin, Payne? You're a freakin cop. You ain't got squat on us. You can't just come in here wavin your piece like it meant somethin!"

Gognitti's words were his distraction. He fired off a round from the hip, missing me completely but making me drop the shotgun. I returned the favor, gut shooting him with the 9mm.

"Ahh!" Gognitti screamed, doubling over. "Oh my God, oh, God... You shot me?" He glanced around at his men, who were coming in behind him. "What the hell are you waiting for, you apes? Kill him! Kill Payne!"

"With pleasure, boss!" one of them yelled, launching himself at me like a wild bear.

Gognitti bailed. I made like Chow Yun Fat, dodging the goon's attack and pistol whipping the back of his head. Two other guys began shooting at me and doing a piss-poor job of it. I pulled the Eagle and returned the favor, shooting through the furniture as if it were paper. The bullets found their legs, and they were down.

I didn't stay to finish the job. Gognitti had already fled the building, leaving a convenient trail of blood for me to follow, like I was some rabid hound dog on the scent. Gognitti was running scared. He could try to escape, but with a bullet in his gut leaking sauce like a broken bottle of Tabasco, he was quickly running out of time.

He knew where his boss was hiding, and I wanted to square things up with Lupino. I ran, surprised at how far ahead the man had gotten. I don't know about angels, but it's fear that gives men wings.

Before I knew it I was out of the suite. The blood trail led to an open window, out onto the rooftops and the howling wind. I followed, careful not to get blown over the side.

Now it was even easier to follow Gognitti. His footprints stood out in the crisp, white snow, dark blood highlighting the way. I hustled, jumping over or around roof fans and vents, pipes and antennas. And then there he was, Vinnie Gognitti, at the edge of roof with no where to go.

"End of the line, Vinnie!" I called through the gale.

The man was breathing hard, staring over the edge into the night. He turned back to see me coming, gun leveled.

Then he jumped.

Police Brutality

I peered over the edge of the building.

Vinnie had landed on the roof of a subway train headed for downtown. It was a stupid idea, made stupider by my copying it. There was no time to think. I jumped from the roof and landed on the same train, several passenger cars behind Gognitti.

This was my second train ride of the night. The way it started didn't promise anything better than the last one. Freezing wind tearing at my face like sandpaper and razors, ice hard and slick under my hands and feet. And somewhere in the background the wail of sirens, the city howling after me.

I held on for my life, fingers slipping, shoes finding little purchase on the arched roof of the train. The shotgun tumbled from my grasp, disappearing off the edge of the train's roof and into the darkness. I tried to keep my eyes open.

New York sped by on fast forward, dark rooftop water towers and a dead forest of antennas and chimneys, all a blur. When the train began to slow Gognitti made his move. I followed suit, tumbling through the air onto a snow bank the size of a bus. We rolled and slipped down it, Gognitti crying in pain as he fell. Finally we reached the bottom, finding ourselves in a deserted basketball court.

I'd lost the shotgun but the Beretta was still handy. I aimed it at Gognitti's head as he tried to scramble away on ice and his own blood.

All around us the sewer grates pumped out steam as if the fires of Hell were burning high beneath us. It was shakedown time.

"Oh, God damn it, Payne! I'll kill ya, you lousy freakin cop!" Gognitti tried to stand, but slipped over, clutching his stomach.

I stooped over the crumpled man. "Where's Lupino?"

Gognitti spat blood. "Screw you!"

"Bad start, Vinnie." I leaned in and grasped the front of his blood-soaked shirt.

Vinnie cried out, "Police brutality!"

"I rate pretty high on that."

Gognitti's eyes went deer-like. "Ya, ya, you can't just h-h-hurt me in cold blood!"

"Uh huh. Keep telling yourself that. Listen good, candy man. I'm not going to be anybody's fall guy. I already left the Finitos pushing up daisies with Muerte. Tell me where your boss is hiding!" I thrust the Beretta against the side of Gognitti's head. The man lost control of his bladder.

There was no glory in this. I hadn't asked for this crap. Trouble had come to me in big dark swarms. The good and the just were like gold dust in this city. I had no illusions, I was not one of them. I was no hero. Just me and the gun and the crook. My options had decreased to a singular course.

I cocked the Beretta.

"Okay, I'll tell ya, I'll tell ya!" Vinnie squealed. "Just don't hurt me no more! Please!"

I leaned in real close. “Where?”

“Lupino’s at Ragna Rock, the nightclub. But he’s freakin crazy, he’s gone voodoo, he ain’t normal no more. I-I-I didn’t know what to do, he’s killin his own men, he’s a freakin lunatic! Listen, book me, take me in, haul me to the freakin jail, just don’t hurt me...”

I released Gognitti. He collapsed to the ice, shaking and crying and drenched in his own blood and urine. I knew there was more to his fear than me and my gun. He’d been living in mortal terror of his boss. I pulled an icy pair of handcuffs from my jacket and tossed them at the wretch. I was through with him. What he chose to do from then on was his own business.

“Your rights will be read at your funeral.”

Ragna Rock

The storm blasted New York with everything it had, leaving the streets void of people and traffic.

After Vinnie I'd wandered for a while, clearing my mind of the drama and the violence, not wanting to risk a public establishment. In truth, Lupino's whereabouts had hit me like the shot I'd given Gognitti. I thought it over, all the while my feet taking me where I needed to go.

Ragna Rock. Lupino's private nightclub. I'd never been there but after three years in bed with the mob I knew enough to apply for a job as tour guide. A den of drugs built into an old theatre. I knew what waited inside: V-head junkies ready to explode in random acts of senseless violence... And Lupino's goon squad, the worst stone-cold killers this side of Hell.

By the time I arrived the cold had sunk into my shoes, crawled up my legs, finally turning my stomach into an icebox.

Lupino's club was as inviting as a headache, flickering and flashing to a machine gun beat. I'd heard the belly of the nightclub was a gothic theme park that began with bondage games and led to the nasty stuff from there. As subtle with it's dark message as a cop killer bullet through the heart.

The old iron railings surrounding the club were solid. After fifteen minutes trying to find a back door I finally gave up and hit the front gate. To my surprise it was open, the ticket booths empty. I went in, my hand on the gun. I didn't know where Lupino was hiding but I sure as hell knew the bastard's mooks wouldn't be impressed with my gate crashing. After all, Lupino hadn't invited me to this party.

One of the ticket booths was lit up, illuminating the spiraling snowflakes in a sickly orange glow. Everything about the place was rank with the stench of the deviant arts. A door inside the booth was ajar, so I took a breath and went in.

Inside the air was musty. I couldn't see anything at first, but then my eyes adjusted. I had the feeling of sneaking through a crypt. Hastily erected shelving lined the exposed brick and mortar, a dying light bulb hung bare from a line of wire. Nobody was home. I stepped farther into the wolf's den.

Given the setting I was surprised to find that somebody had been passing time reading. I picked up a paperback entitled *The Age of Murder and Storm* and almost laughed. The blurb on the back mentioned Norse mythos and Ragnarok, the end of the Viking world with a terrible winter that covered the Earth in ice, when vile crimes were rampant and all humanity lost. I could see how somebody impressionable might get it into their head that we were at the end of time. I was also beginning to see what the nightclub and its owner were all about.

As I looked around I quickly realized the room was stacked with more light reading—*Necronomicron*, *Witchcraft*, and *Paradise Lost*. Old exotic titles like *Malleus Maleficarum* and *Deumbrarum Reginoyem Portis*. Books with pentagrams on their covers, all dealing with the occult and the infernal lying between stacks of horror movies, skin mags, and a couple of ornamental Ouija boards.

The only thing I could take seriously was the thought of Jack Lupino taking it seriously. He had been spending a lot of time getting intimate with the guy downstairs. Had this been why the mooks were acting so jumpy? Every time Lupino's name came up there was some kind of incident connected to it.

I heard a noise and dropped the Freaking Zombie Demons From Outer Space DVD. I moved into the shadows and waited as the footsteps grew closer. As they did the voices of two men became audible from behind the door leading to the inner sanctum.

“...What with Dino an’ all... I wouldn’t say anything to his face. He might not... Well, who knows what he’ll do?”

“Somebody’s gotta go in there, man. It’s too freaky. All that screaming and shouting. Now it’s gone silent. It’s been days. Somebody’s gotta go in there.”

The first guy seemed to whistle through his teeth. “No way. I ain’t going in there, I don’t care what the boss says. You wanna end up like Dino?”

The voices and the footsteps faded. I couldn’t help but wonder what had happened to Dino, and if Jacky Boy had seriously fallen far enough into his own psychosis that his own men were ready to disobey the Don because of him. Whatever the details, the goons here were spooked, off their guard. I had to take this opportunity to get to Lupino. Even if his own men didn’t have the balls to go see him I would gladly drop in on their boss. Pay him a visit.

I cracked the door and peered into the darkened corridor. No one around. I moved on and found myself in one of the smaller dance floors. Bondage equipment lay scattered on the bar and what were probably blood stains marked the badly painted pentagram dance floor. Some of the cheesy lighting was still on, painting everything in impressionist hues. The oily lasciviousness of the place seeped into my skin, making it crawl. I longed for a hot shower. No such luck. Then things began to heat up anyway.

“Payne?”

I spun around in time to see one of Lupino’s guys reaching for his piece. I’d gotten distracted by the garishness of the place. Sloppy. I raised my weapon and fired off a few rounds into the mook’s face. He disappeared back through the darkened doorway he’d crawled from. I knew his friends wouldn’t be far behind. I dove for the bar knocking over bottles of cheap whiskey and stale beer nuts and found a fire escape. I barred the door and with a broken two-by-four and fled up the stairs to the catwalk.

At the top I paused to catch my breath. Something in my side burned like a broken rib. I put it out of my mind, surveyed my new surroundings. I was above a backstage area. The controls for the light show and pyrotechnics were here in as a long bank of consoles, along with some instruments and costumes. I didn’t want to know what kind of music they played here. If the rest of the place was anything to go by it would only make sense ramped up on V and with a desire for self-mutilation.

There didn’t seem to be any way through from here. The way I’d come was barred and probably filling with guns fast. The catwalk had a stairway that led down to the stage area, but the stage screens, which were used for scenery backdrops, blocked the way through.

There wasn’t time to case the area for hidden exits or trapdoors, so my option was simple. I stumbled to the control hub for the stage trying to find anything that resembled a switch or a control for the wire pulleys that would lift the heavy stage screens. After a few seconds I grew impatient and began slapping the buttons. Fireworks exploded from the stage in bright sparkling arcs and screeching whistles. So much for subtlety. Every goon in the joint would hear this stage show.

Growing more desperate I hit a lever and a button. The button seemed to be the smoke machine control, but the lever did its job. One of the screens moved left while another raised up. A

pair of Lupino's men were waiting behind. I hit the fireworks again, which exploded in front of them. As they fell back I slapped the lever and brought the massive stage screen down on top of them, crushing them instantly.

Anyone left in Ragna Rock still asleep after that was either in a V-coma or a victim of Jack Lupino's extracurricular activities. I didn't want to wait around to find out exactly how many gangsters were holed up in this dive.

Hitting the lever a third time moved a different section of stage screen. This time I saw a clear path through to the main stage. Good enough. I ran down the metal steps to the banks of speakers and PA systems. When I got to the stage I saw the screen was coming down. I slid under seconds before it crashed to the ground, splintering the wooden beams and sending a cloud of dust into the air. The pulley tethers had snapped. I wasn't surprised.

An Empire Of Evil

The stories I'd heard about Ragna Rock had brought to mind dungeons and gothic architecture, sexual deviants in leather and spikes, V-heads ready to get intimate with medical equipment, torture devices and death metal.

Nothing prepared me for Lupino's den.

Ragna Rock's interior was a nightmare maze of black corridors and demon-themed dance floors. But beyond the main stage I'd found my way to the VIP boxes where the select few could watch the action below. From there I'd taken the corridors to the attic. It'd been a gut-call, but it paid off. Suddenly the decor changed from neogothic-dungeon-esque to black mass.

I was close.

The backstage area led me to Lupino's inner sanctum. The hot air inside was like an invisible wall, thick with incense and something else, a sickly sweet smell that made me gag. This was the rotten core of the Big Apple. Without a doubt, Lupino lurked somewhere ahead, a spider at the center of his web.

The darkened anteroom I found myself in was filled with tiny candles on wrought-iron pedestals, blood-red velvet curtains draped along walls steeped in shadow, the ceiling hung with elaborate chandeliers. I didn't waste time taking in the scene, the vapors already beginning to make my head swim. I held back another wave of nausea.

Torn pieces of a letter lay scattered on a sofa, drawing me to them. I knelt down to where the air was cooler and tried to piece together the broken script. What I read no longer shocked me. Punchinello had threatened Lupino in writing. The note had been torn to pieces out of rage, bloody fingerprints covering the fragments.

...Don't want them to think that one of my boys isn't playing with a full deck. Shape up Jack, we're running a business here. I'd hate to send the Trio over to strong-arm you...

I let the pieces flutter to the floor. The Trio were the Don's notorious henchmen. All this time I'd thought the Ragna Rock front was another Muerte technique, a guise to keep the mooks in line and scare off would be competition, cementing the Don's reputation as ruthless and untouchable. But if Punchinello himself was worried about Lupino's act, then maybe Jacky Boy's mind, pickled in V, had succumbed to his own horror story.

I looked at the bloody scattered pieces of the note. Obviously Lupino hadn't been intimidated by the Don's threat.

I got up again, feeling stronger. A table was scattered with invocations and half melted candles. A stained quill rested in a sanguine inkwell. The notes were demented arcane nonsense written in rusty blood. A mishmash of demons, devils and dark gods evoked. The list was extensive: Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Baphomet, Lucifer, Loki, Cthulhu, Hela, a promise of gory sacrifice. Lupino was after that old Faustian deal, your soul for power and fortune. Just sign on the dotted line with your blood.

I backed away from the crimson contract and bumped a lectern. I had my gun drawn and ready to fire before I realized I was still alone. A book perched the lectern fell open, the pages smeared with Lupino's now familiar red trademark. I peered at it, my heart sinking farther into the pit of my stomach. Jack Lupino was crazy all right.

...Mythic wolves let loose to devour the sun and the moon! Lupino is the wolf, I'm Mr. Beast! The big, bad Fenris Wolf! I'm the end-of-the-world-man, wearing the flesh of fallen angels!

So Lupino thought it was the end of the world. After Y-two-K Doomsday had become a cliché. But who was I to talk? A brooding underdog avenger alone against an empire of evil, out to right a grave injustice. I'd lost sight of objectivity. There were only personal apocalypses. Nothing is a cliché when it's happening to you.

My foot caught something. Immediately I knew where that other stench was coming from. Bodies in the shadows, bound and gagged. I thought of Dino. I hurried from the anteroom gasping. The stench didn't get any better in the next room.

"You have come!"

A disembodied voice turned my blood to ice. Lupino. But not Lupino. Changed somehow. Different. I'd only met the man once but I knew somehow he'd transformed.

"Yes, you have come. A witness!"

I had my gun pointed every direction at once, but saw no one. I staggered into the cathedral-like chamber aiming this way then that. That's when I saw the tables. What looked like body parts stacked near what appeared to be an altar surrounded by a hastily designed pentagram, much like the dance floors had sported. In the center was some sort of stone reflecting pool, but it wasn't filled with water. I doubled over, losing what little I'd eaten that night.

"A witness to the end of time! It's now! I will rise to her side. I don't need the words! I'm beyond the words!"

I tried to recover my posture. To my horror there was something rising from the pool. Its eyes seemed green and huge behind the rivulets of dripping blood. It was Lupino, rising from a blood-bath of his own making.

"Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Baphomet, Lucifer, Loki, Cthulhu, Hela!" he cried to the vaulted ceiling above. He raised both arms as if to draw strength from raging winter storm outside. "Blood to you all!"

My gun arm went limp. The wolf had emerged, but now I'd caught up with Lupino I was no longer eager for a quid-pro-quo session. The monster dripped blood as he climbed from the pool.

"I've tasted the flesh of fallen angels," Lupino growled through sticky red lips. "I've tasted the Devil's green blood. It runs in my veins. I've seen beyond the world of skin, the architecture of blood and bone marrow."

My left hand bumped something behind me. A brick wall. Unaware, I'd been retreating from Lupino's bloody form. Now the demoniac was pointing at me, grinning from ear to ear. A wolf's grin.

"Payne. She told me you'd come. Death is coming. She is coming!" he cried. "And Hell follows her. This is the twilight winter. I am ready to be her son! Her time is now, and all who stand in her way must die!"

Then the werewolf was charging me like something from a b-movie horror flick. I had enough wits left to drive out of the way as Lupino crashed through a table, scattering candles and red wax across the floor. A spray of hot blood hit my face and I was reminded of the Spanish Matadors. By the time I was on my feet again the wolf-man was already on me, long-stemmed, wrought-iron candelabra in hand. I raised the Eagle, which coughed several shots at nothing before

flying from my hand. The candelabra struck again, this time at my head. I dodged, ran, dodged again. There was nowhere to go. Lupino was laughing and hyperventilating, an animal gone rabid.

The gun had disappeared under one of the pedestals piled high with parts of Lupino's unfortunate associates. I ducked behind a table as it splintered in two and made for the altar. Halfway across the chamber I slipped on Lupino's bloody trail and dove headfirst into the base of the pedestal. An Uzi fell from it like a gift from God as the iron candelabra smashed a hole in the wooden floor. I couldn't believe my luck.

Lupino stood over me. I scrambled for the gun, hoping it was loaded...

Coming here, I had known there'd be a catch in it somewhere, and this one was the Empire State Building of catches. Lupino was pumped up and dying to go fifteen rounds with a mutant alligator. I didn't give him another opportunity to cave my skull in. I lifted the Uzi between my knees and squeezed the trigger. The gun popped and rattled in my hand. Lupino staggered backward in mid swing. For a moment, I thought Jacky-boy was going to keep coming, despite emptying half a clip into his chest. He tumbled backward into his own blood-bath.

Lupino was down and I wanted to make real sure he'd stay that way. I got to my feet and finished the job. V was a bad monster, turned them into freaking zombie demons from outer space.

"I think he's dead already."

"Huh?" I spun around, and that's when it happened.

"But dead or not, you've got the wrong guy."

In stepped this knockout femme fatale, holding a gun to my face.

I returned the favor.

Part II: *A Cold Day* In Hell

The Dream

“Lisa Punchinello?” Despite the gun in my face I couldn’t help but stare at the woman. Lisa Punchinello was the Don’s wife.

“Mona Sax, Lisa’s evil twin.” She was deadpan.

I kept my gun leveled at her chest. “Your safety’s off, evil twin. You might hurt someone with that gun of yours.”

Mona laughed. “Lisa’s the damsel in distress.”

“What does that make you?” I was stalling.

“The professional. I’d blow you away without batting an eye.”

I swallowed. “Sure, and you can check my credentials splattered all over this joint.”

Mona’s gaze hardened. Her dark eyes flicked down to Lupino’s half-submerged corpse. “Jack couldn’t have framed you, not in the state he was in. We’re after the same slimebag. Angelo Punchinello’s the one who murdered your friend and framed you with it.”

My heart froze in my chest. Outside, the storm howled like the big bad wolf, beating harder against the old theatre as if trying to get inside. “You know this for a fact?”

Mona smiled. “I’ve got my sources.”

“Sources?” I laughed. “I don’t have a clue these days. I shoot them as they come. Seems rather personal to go after your brother-in-law, though. Who put a contract on the archfiend?”

Mona shook her pretty head. Her dark hair bounced around her pale shoulders. “This one’s mine. I hate the guts of that sadistic wife-beater.” She hesitated, her professional aura fading for a split second. “Say, why not pool our bullets for this one?”

I wanted to let out the breath I’d been holding. “I thought you’d never ask. My finger was starting to twitch.”

She lowered her gun and walked over to an oversized cabinet filled with every kind of poison invented by man. “How do you like your Whiskey?”

I let my own gun fall to the floor. It finally hit me just how dirt tired I was.

“I’m easy.” I took the amber filled tumbler and toasted Lupino’s dead body. “Here’s to fulfilled contracts.” I knocked back the drink. It was good stuff. Tasted sweet as honey going down.

“You’re a real angel, Max,” Mona breathed. And suddenly the pool of blood turned green, and the floor dissolved.

“Nothing personal,” the evil twin was saying from a million miles away, “but I can’t risk you going berserk and getting Lisa killed.”



The nightmare was always the same. Violent shapes moving in darkness, old and ugly. The killer's mad laughter was a riddle filled with wicked innuendo. Somewhere the baby was crying. A

familiar voice screamed out from the darkness, splitting my skull. “Max, no! Please, Max. Why? I didn’t mean to! I’m sorry! Max!”

The world faded into existence, distorted, wrong. The house. Our house, filled with shattered dreams. I stumbled through the front door. “Michelle?”

The living room was quiet.

I walked to the mantelpiece in slow motion and picked up a picture of Alex and me outside a courthouse, arms raised in victory.

Alex...

We’d had a few moments of glory between us. Crime fighting comrades, the best NYPD-DEA collaborative team... Good-hearted macho bullshit like that. I would have given anything to have him here as my backup. No such luck. No luck at all.

I climbed the stairs to the top floor, one creaking step at a time. I felt as if I were moving in slow motion, everything cast in an eerie green glow. At the top of the landing I saw the door to the nursery open. My feet were on automatic. I didn’t want to go in there.

“No, no, please, God, no...”

It was my voice. The nursery was a tomb.

I was desperate to get out. I fell through the door to the office, stumbled to the bureau. Michelle’s diary lay on the table. I couldn’t stop my hand from reaching out and opening the blood stained pages. Michelle had been working part-time in the District Attorney’s office. I had opened the diary to today’s entry, her handwriting all pretty curves.

An army dossier found its way to my desk yesterday. Valhalla? Isn’t that a Norse myth? Something about Vikings. I tried to tell Max about it but he was busy. That cute frown on his brow. Guess it’s nothing, probably a mix-up at the courier service...

I swore, from now on I would always find time for her. It was a hollow promise. Too little, too late. Then the diary faded away and I was moving in slow motion again, this is your life in Hell. The bedroom door flew open and I was staring into a mirror. Myself staring back at me, accusingly.

“You killed her!” the mirror me screamed. “Murderer!”

Michelle lay on the bed, broken. I wanted to go to her.

“Murderer!” The mirror man said again. He raised his gun at my face. I begged him to pull the trigger.

The Baseball Bat

“We should’ve known when we found you snoring next to Lupino’s corpse. A comedian, huh?”

I woke up in a bad dream. My head felt two sizes too small for my brain. Somewhere an alarm was ringing. I couldn’t move. Something rank was in the air and the compulsion to hurl was strong.

“Max Payne. I envy the name.”

I opened my eyes. Someone stood over me, backlit by an orange glow. The shape moved in close, out of focus.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Frankie ‘The Bat’ Niagara.”

I was on autopilot. The fat Italian in the dress shirt was sweating like a sumo wrestler in thermal undies. “Niagara? As in you cry a lot?” He had the baseball bat, and I was tied to a chair. Pissing him off was the smart thing to do.

Frankie swung his namesake into my chest. Then he caught the side of my head, the back of my neck. The pain was awesome.

“Nothing wrong with a little laugh now and then,” Frankie said. “Take me for example. I love to watch cartoons. Captain Baseball Bat’s my favorite. Cartoon violence’s a fascinating thing, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I said, spitting blood.

Niagara continued as if to himself. “Hit em, stab em, shoot em full of holes, blow em to bits, vaporize em, disintegrate em, no matter what you do, they’ll still be back, good as new.” He paused as if contemplating the idea. “Nothing like that ever happens in the real world.”

“I guess not,” I said, weakly.

Frankie laughed. He wiped the sweat from his brow. “I need to take a leak and maybe grab a cold one at the bar. Don’t worry, I’ll be back to finish you off. And then, it’s checkout time.”

He swaggered out, and the door clanged shut behind him, locks clicking into place. “You play, you pay, you bastard,” I hissed through clenched teeth.

I began rocking in the chair I was tied to, feeling the old anger rise, contorting and constricting the ropes about me until the wood began to splinter.

Everyone makes mistakes. Mine hadn’t been to crack jokes about the goon with the bat, he’d have cracked my skull regardless. It hadn’t even been to trust a girl with a gun. I had blindly gone after the first bad guy on my hit list when I should have been aiming farther up the ladder, at the head of the Punchinello family. Somehow I couldn’t bring myself to be pissed at Mona. Guess I had a soft spot for a pretty face.

The flimsy chair broke apart and I fell on my backside in the mess, panting. I was running on pure adrenaline. But when somebody decides to play baseball with your head, you tend to get sore.

It took me a moment to realize Punchinello’s goons had dragged me back to the basement of Lupino’s hotel, the furnace blasting away before me like Hell’s boiler room. Bringing me back here was their first mistake. It would be their last.

Who was I kidding? I was beaten, bruised, hungover. I felt like the chair I'd broken to get free. All I had was Niagara's bat, sticky with my own blood. I snatched it up, feeling the weight of it in my hands. It would have to do, but without a gun I'd be no match for Frankie or his friends. I'd have to play hide and seek with them.

I went to the door Frankie had locked, a cold sweat beginning to take hold of me. Two voices issued from behind the steel frame.

"The boss is dead, Muerte's dead, and now Lupino? Man, I wouldn't mind taking a swing at that son-of-a-bitch double-crossing cop myself."

"Yeah, I know how you feel, but it's Frankie's turf," the other said.

"I know, I know. I just wouldn't mind having a go at him myself!"

There was no getting through the door, let alone the goons behind it. I surveyed the basement furnace room through the haze of my half-doped vision. Another door on the far side of the room, behind the huge furnace, was ajar. I scrambled to it, stepping over pages of bloodied copies of Captain Baseball Bat Boy comic strips, wishing for Bicycle Helmet-girl's special powers.

No helmet, the bat would have to do.

The door led to a concrete corridor. At the end of the corridor was a guy in black bomber-jacket with his back to me. There was no way I could sneak up on the guy without giving myself away. And then it would be marble city.

Suddenly a cell phone began ringing. I nearly jumped out of my skin before realizing that the mook in the corridor had gotten a phone call. Probably a junkie in need of a fix.

"Yo? What?" the guy was saying. "I can't, I'm helping Frankie tonight. No, Frankie's down here at the hotel. What? No..."

I took my chance. I pushed the door open with my foot and ninja ran up on the bad guy. The bat swung, connecting with the back of his skull, ending the call. The cell dropped the floor and shattered into pieces of useless plastic. No help there, then. I quickly searched the body for a gun, found gold in the form of a dull looking .45.

I moved to the next room, not wanting to risk returning to the furnace and waiting for Frankie to show up. Instead I moved forward, trying to find a stairwell and an exit out of the Bates Hotel. I stopped, gagging. The storage room I was now in was humid, a sweet smell of decay rising from the French drains. Below me, I knew, were enough corpses to put a mass murder to shame.

I ran from the room, gun ready, and took the first set of stairs I could find. At the ground floor I realized that things were fast going from bad to worse.

The boys in blue had come and gone. They had decorated the place with chalk outlines and tied it together with yellow tape. The cops who had stayed behind were dead, lying at my feet with two shots to the chest, one to the head. Professional. Whatever happened now, Frankie, his boys, and I had the place all for ourselves.

More voices. I hid behind a stack of crates between broken reels of police tape.

"That crazy witch, you should've heard her!" someone yelled. "She was a real scream when the boys caught her trying to cap the Don!"

The other side of the conversation was lost to me, and I suspected the guy was on one of the hotel's pay phones.

“Oh, man, that’s friggin bad!” the voice continued. “To the Trio? Shit, that’s even worse than what Frankie’s doing to that poor bastard downstairs. She’s gonna take a *long* time to die!”

In my crouched position my head began to throb even harder than before. Or maybe my head was hurting worse because I knew the mobster muscle on the phone was talking about Mona. Putting it mildly, Punchinello’s Trio were nothing but bad news.

The phone call ended, and after a moment I crept to the end of the hallway and peeked around the corner. The pay phone was unoccupied and I could see the entrance to the bar ahead. No one was around.

As stealthily as I could in my current condition I moved to a small office room and formulated my next move. What I found was more evidence that Punchinello didn’t like me that much. A letter lay on the desk next to a stack of playing cards featuring nude women on the back, an almost empty bottle of scotch, and a radio dialed down low.

...Max Payne should die like a dog for the trouble he’s caused. Frankie, I know I can trust you to give this matter the dedication it needs...

I almost laughed. I had managed to piss off more murderers and big time bad guys in the last several hours than my years of decent police work. Then the radio static caught my attention — cocktail party effect. I’d heard my name amidst the white noise of the news cast.

“...The fact remains that all the victims so far identified in the Ragna Rock shooting have been known criminals, many of whom had large doses of V in their blood. Reliable sources say that Max Payne was also among those killed, although no body has been recovered at this time...”

‘Reliable sources’. That meant somebody thought the Mafia had me, and didn’t want the cops snooping around anymore. The body would be delivered to them barely recognizable, case closed. Don Punchinello had the power to be that reliable source, which was no news. But his news was old news. Framing me hadn’t been enough. Don Punchinello had put a hit on me. He wanted me dead, and it had been important enough for him to give written instructions to Frankie about it.

Something about the Don’s letter smacked of fear, and it was fear that had given Gognitti wings. Now that fear bolstered my own anger. I dialed the radio into an opera, cranked up the volume and headed to the bar, gun at my side, a means to an end — an extension of the pain.

As I approached the double doors I remembered Muerte and Candy. The bar was fast developing quite a history. I kicked open the doors and strode inside not knowing what or who I would find. True to his words, however, Frankie was there, having a beer.

“Holy hell!” he cried dropping his brew. “How did you get loose?”

I pointed the gun at his head as the libretto reached crescendo. “Got bored waiting. Thought, what the hell, we could just as well finish this here.” I pulled the trigger and the back of Frankie’s head ended up on racks of spirits behind him. Seconds later another guy burst through the back door and I put two in his chest.

It was time to leave.



It wasn’t difficult to find Frankie’s car. It was the one with the Captain Baseball Bat Boy bumper sticker. I was sure he wouldn’t mind me borrowing it.

I wasn't four blocks from the hotel before I spotted the tail. It wasn't hard to miss — a big black Mercedes. It sped up, going around me in the snow drifts and cutting me off. I reached for the .45.

I had seen the car before. That time it had heralded impressive explosions. The man who got out of the Merc was as white as snow in a pale suit and tie.

Vladimir was back. He pointed a finger at me.

"Bang! You're dead, Max Payne!"

I might have laughed, if I had remembered how. I wound down my window. "What's this supposed to be, cops and robbers? Look, you want something with me, get in line."

Vlad's smile faded to earnest concern. "Peace, man. Relax! You know, you are a real news item? 'Armed and dangerous'. I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse!" The Russian began to laugh at his own joke. "I've always wanted to say that!"

Part of me kept thinking I would wake up, and all this would be a terrible dream. "The drive-by media know squat. It's a bum rap, I've been framed."

Vlad shrugged. "That's a moot point. Whatever you did or did not do, I'm sure you had a good reason for doing it. Listen, I'm freezing my *zhopa* off out here. Want to hear me out?"

I had no reason to trust the Russian. But everything that had led me to this point had been a coincidence of some sort or another. The only thing I had left to do was find the Don, and repay him for all the pain.

"Okay, I'm listening."

An Offer You Can't Refuse

The world outside flickered by in minimalistic lines and muted colors. The inside of Vlad's Mercedes was a stark contrast, all warmth and black leather.

"Punchinello messing with V is bad for business," Vlad was saying, the .45 pressing uncomfortably against my swollen ribs. I popped a couple of aspirin, wondering abstractly what the upper dosage limit was before my internal organs began to shut down.

"But that's not all!" Vlad continued. "There is this guy, Borris Dime, used to pull jobs for me. He's the captain of the cargo ship *Charon*. Now the bastard turncoat has gone over to the other side. Punchinello's."

The Russian's voice grew dark at the name. I knew the feeling.

"What's on the ship, weapons?" I asked.

Vlad smiled. "You *are* a business man, Max. Yes, the ship's loaded with hi-tech hardware—guns—my business. If Punchinello gets hold of that cargo, he's won and I have lost, and you'll have your work cut out for you. If you want to get to Punchinello, you will need heavy-duty persuaders. I'm the man to get them for you. Change the ship back under my flag, maybe pop two in the traitor Dime's head while you are at it... You'll get enough guns to start the apocalypse. You in or out?"

Vladimir was one of those old-time bad guys with honor and morals, which made him almost one of the good guys.

None of us was a saint.

The car pulled up to the Brooklyn riverfront. Beyond the dock was a maze of rusty containers, sharp-boned cranes looming up from the snow storm. On a night like this you couldn't help but think of the dark army of dead men sleeping with the fishes, cement shoes in line. But no minotaur lurked in this labyrinth. Somewhere out there, on the clanking deck of his freighter, the skipper of the *Charon* was waiting, like the ferryman of the river Styx.

I took out the .45 and checked the clip. "Let's get this show on the road."



"Both of em beaten to a pulp, eyes swollen, they couldn't see in the end, swaying on their feet, slipping in the blood."

I had left the Russian and the warmth of the Mercedes for the bitter cold of the Brooklyn docks, hitting the ground running until I was deep inside the maze of shipping containers. Only the voices had stopped my progress, coming from an open container several feet ahead of me.

"Oh, damn, that was money's worth. Brought tears to my eyes, simply transcendental."

I didn't know what the men were talking about and I didn't care. If they were Dime's boys then they were Punchinello's boys, there was no difference.

"Hello?" one of the voices called from inside the container. They must have heard my footsteps crunching in the frozen snow. "Rico? Rico Muerte? That you? This way, in here!"

Muerte's name was enough for me. I swung around the corner and blasted the men without hesitation. The shots reverberated inside the container, deafening. The first guy went down, dead. The second fell over, grasping at his chest.

"Where's Dime?" I growled, pulling the goon off the ground, my gun pressed to his head.

"Ah, ah, on the s-s-ship!" he cried.

I dropped him. A moment later he stopped moving. I didn't care, I was paying attention to the sniper rifle on the table. A note lay next to it with one word printed in the middle.

MAYOR.

So, Rico Muerte had come to town to do more than sort out family troubles. Suddenly I was a cop again. Exhibit one, two, and three: A briefcase of money, a sniper rifle, and the letter printed on a piece of expensive paper.

Mayor... It didn't sound like a Mafia contract at all. It was too cold and to the point. I wondered what other secrets I would discover before this night was over.

With Rats And Oily Water

When the maze of containers finally ended I found myself at a warehouse. The idea of the mayor of New York being on a hit list had left me reeling, distracted me. It felt like the more dirt I dug the more incredible the secrets I revealed.

This couldn't go on forever, it had to end somewhere. Part of me knew it would end when the last bullet had been fired, when all the bodies had fallen and there was no one else to kill. I didn't want to think that far ahead, so I pushed it aside and kept moving.

Once I got through the empty warehouse it didn't take long to find Boris Dime's ship. Rust had crept over the side of the cargo steamer a long time ago. Dime would be on board, somewhere. I'd have to smoke half of his crew to even get near the gang plank. The guns were probably being kept in the hold, buried amidst the rats and oily water.

I moved to the gang plank, knowing that surprise was my only advantage. Dime didn't know I was coming, wasn't expecting me. With Muerte in town he probably thought he was untouchable, even by Vlad.

Two guys carrying a crate on the deck stopped and looked at me in disbelief. I shot both of them before they had time to drop the cargo. As the box fell it split, revealing a beautiful array of assault rifles. Vlad had said the *Charon* contained some high-end materiel. He hadn't been lying. I picked up the M16, pocked the .45. I found several clips and stuffed as many of them in my pockets as I could, gun safety protocols be damned.

The shots I'd fired had been loud, but the howling storm coupled with the noise of screaming gulls, cranes creaking in the night, and the sound of the water slapping angrily at the hull had masked most of the ruckus. From my place on the deck I saw the bridge, and moved to cover. I didn't want to expose myself to any of Dime's men up on the bridge deck. I would be an easy target from down here.

Too late. One of the deckhands walked out from the lower bridge spotting me and my little friend. The thug ran back inside sounding the alarm before I could get a shot off from the unfamiliar weapon.

"Dime! Dime!"

I followed, hoping that I had configured the M16 correctly. It was a large gun, but with Dime's men about to flood the deck like rats escaping a sinking ship I needed an advantage.

The bridge was quiet. The helm was unmanned, which was to be expected while docked. Noise was coming from below, through a door beyond the bulkhead. I aimed the gun. Two guys came running out. The M16 exploded in my hands, tearing the men to shreds. One of them had been carrying a grenade, which dropped to the deck with a *clank!*

To my relief the pin was still in place. I grabbed the explosive, pulled the ring and threw it through the door where it bounced down the steps to the cargo hold.

Several screams were cut off as the explosion rocked the ship.

It was now or never. I ran down the stairs and through the smoke and confusion.

"Max Payne!" A voice cried out in the smoke. "Tell the Devil that Dime sent you!"

Boris Dime was a big Russian bear carrying a sub-machine gun. The bullets hit the deck and bulkheads, ricocheting off the metal. The place was packed full of crates, any number of which could have explosives in them. I had to risk firing my own weapon, which I did in Boris's general direction.

"Vlad says 'hi!'" I yelled above the sound of bullets. I moved up behind more crates, keeping low and diving between cover. Within seconds I was on the captain, his clip running dry at the crucial moment.

That was all the time in the world necessary to finish the job. Time began bungee back up from the fall, the point of return when everything slows for a moment of pure clarity. I unloaded the M16 until the clip ran out. What was left of Boris you could have fed to the fishes.



I limped to the stairs and returned to the bridge. The cargo below could wait, and I needed to let Vlad know the job was done. If Punchinello knew I was coming he would have his own private army waiting, and I needed the Russian's influence to give me a fighting chance.

To my surprise, the phone on the bridge's helm controls began to ring. I picked up the receiver. "Yeah?"

"Dime? Angelo Punchinello here." He didn't have to say his name, I could tell by the forced upper-class accent disguising the Bronx lilt that it was the Don.

"Angie!" I said. "Your timing couldn't have been better. Tell me something, how much did Dime cost you? I bet it was more than his name."

The voice on the line exploded. "Max Payne?"

"Right the first time." I was enjoying pissing the Don off. It felt good.

"You're dead, you little punk!"

"Aren't you confusing me with Boris here? But you are right of course. Pretty soon, we should get together and have a talk."

"You son of a —"

I smashed the receiver back down and smiled. Pissing Punchinello off was a dangerous game, but when people get mad, they make mistakes. I should know. That's where I wanted the Don, mad enough to trip over his own feet. Preferably into a grave.

I left the bridge feeling the night air sting my face. I was half surprised half impressed that Vladimir was waiting for me on the deck, arms wide, a boyish grin on his pale face.

"You know how to handle yourself, Max. Anybody who says different is calling me a liar. Did you get everything you need? You can have anything you want. I owe you one! Seriously, Max, anything you need..."

"Just the guns," I said. "This is my solo. When I'm through, Punchinello won't be anybody's problem."

Vlad put his hands up in acknowledgement. "Clear as vodka. But anytime you get between a rock and a hard place, just whistle, and brother Vlad will appear! This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Having the Russian on my side would make things a little easier. “You really get a bang out of this big time gangster act, don’t you?”

Put Out My Flames With Gasoline.

Even with all of Vlad's firepower, I figured I couldn't get to Punchinello at his Manor. I could only hope he wouldn't pass a chance to hear me beg, to see he's won.

I found a pay phone and dialed the Don's private number, another gift from Vladimir. "This is Max Payne. I want to cut a deal."

Punchinello's first reaction was to scream, "You're a dead man!"

"That's what everybody keeps telling me. I've got your ship and her cargo. Do you want me to hand it over to the Russians? I want to meet. No Payne, no gain, *capice?*"

There was a moment of silence and heavy breathing on the other side of the phone. I could tell that the Don's blood pressure medication wasn't cutting it.

"You know my restaurant?"

"Yeah, I know it," I said.

"One hour."



Like the hotel and tenements, Punchinello's restaurant had seen better days. Snow was falling like ashes from post-apocalyptic skies, but that was outside. Things were about to get hot in the Don's eatery. I wasn't naive, I knew it was a long shot, Angelo Punchinello *actually* showing up.

But like Michelle always told me, there's no crime in hoping.

I didn't see anyone around. The street was dark and empty, as was the restaurant. The front door had a sign saying *Closed*, which was good news. I didn't want innocents getting in the way, even if their choice of bad Italian cuisine was questionable.

I found the front door unlocked so I went in.

"Punchinello?" I called. "It's me. Payne."

I'd left most of the guns and grenades in a duffle bag in the trunk of Frankie's car. The only weapons I carried now were the .45 and a silenced Uzi that didn't leave a lot of breathing room under my coat.

The restaurant was thoroughly darkened. An odd smell lingered in the air. Nothing moved in the shadows. I moved between the rows of tables and booths until I reached the kitchen. Inside there was nothing. I pulled the .45, getting that sinking feeling and wondering why I had been so stupid to think this would work.

A *Whoosh!* came from the main part of the restaurant. I quickly opened the double doors to see what had happened and was greeted by a wall of fire.

I fell back through the doors into the kitchen now understanding what the weird smell was. Punchinello was burning to get me. The feeling was mutual. He was trying to put out my flames with gasoline. I had to find a way out of this disco inferno, before the smoke overwhelmed me.

There was no way through the main restaurant that didn't involve flame broiled Payne, so I moved to the rear of the kitchen to find the back door barred from the outside. My shoes splashed through something wet. More gasoline, I realized. The kitchen was full of the stuff.

Panic began to set in. The fire would quickly spread under the doors and into the kitchen. There *had* to be a way out. I looked around, the only light coming from the fire that now roared against the doors, the little windows shattering from the heat.

The service elevator.

There was a tiny service elevator set into the wall. I wasn't sure if it was meant for laundry, or some other kitchen business from below, but I didn't care. Wherever it led had to be better than here.

I opened the panel to find a chute descending into darkness as the fire burst from under the kitchen doors, spreading across the gas soaked tile and wood in seconds. I threw myself into the darkness, headfirst.

I landed in the sewer, in God knows what. I didn't wait to find out. Two guys were running at me with flashlights.

"Is that Payne?"

"Ice him!"

I pulled the Uzi and the .45 and fired at the light sources. They went down, sending me into darkness. If any more of Punchinello's men were here I would be overwhelmed, the sewer too narrow for gunplay. Suddenly there was light from above.

"Max?"

It was Vlad. He'd uncovered a man hole, illuminating the ladder that would get me out of this hell hole.

"Hold on, Max, I'm coming!"

"No," I called back. "I can make it." I ran to the ladder and began to make the climb. I had to holster the guns to do so, so if any of Punchinello's men were coming for me from the sewer I would be vulnerable. I tried to push that thought from my mind, climb the rungs, hand over hand.

Finally the cold night air greeted me like salvation. Vlad extended a hand, pulling me up and out of the sewer.

"Still think this is a beautiful friendship?" I asked, brushing off strands of rotting vegetable peelings and garbage.

"What's a little muck between friends?"

Vlad had seen my smoke signals, but I wondered how he had known I was down in the sewer.

"The gunshots. They were coming from *underground*," Vlad explained. "You coming? I'd admire your guts but this is no way to get to the Don. We'll drop you off at the Punchinello Manor, do this properly."

I nodded, watching the Don's restaurant burn to the ground. "Sounds good to me."

The Russian took me by the arm and led me to the Mercedes. “You know, when this is over, look me up. I could use a professional like you.”

“Yeah,” I said as the sirens began to cry out above the storm. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Angel Of Death

The night groaned with cold, the garden lights flickering nervously. In their stark illumination the falling snow was dead white before the darkness swallowed it. Beyond, the manor was a silent sentinel in the night, a false harbor, a siren to lead the unwary astray.

I had heard the stories. The Trio were mad dogs. They'd have hung the heads of their enemies over the manor gates if the Capo let them. And speaking of the Don...

Punchinello wanted Payne? He'd see the pain.

There'd be no ringing the front doorbell. I circled around the back of the property, to where a line of trees would hide my approach. The trick in my situation was that there was no trick. No matter what the movies tell you, there are no rules, no secret mantra, no road map to success. It wasn't about how smart or how good you were. It was chaos and luck, and anyone who thought differently was a fool. All you could do was hang on madly, as long and hard as you can.

The .45 felt mighty in my hand, Thor's Hammer, the legendary Mjölhnir. I couldn't see anyone but the gate was open, gaining me quick access through the iron fence.

Footprints in the snow. Someone had been through here recently, someone light and quick and deadly. Equally surprising was the fact that that someone had graciously left the service door open for me and killed the guards.

My money was on Mona.

I locked the service entrance door from the inside. No one would be walking out of here alive. It was shakedown time.

My gun hand wavered in the dimly lighted hallway. The numbing cold of the broken night had followed me in. The Trio would be standing between me and Punchinello. I had read their rap sheets, thick as phonebooks. But I was letting my imagination get the better of me. Still, it was easy to envision the Trio tangoing down the manor's halls to the silent rhythm of their murderous hearts, the blood of their victims rust on their lips. I saw the decaying portraits of their mugshots before my eyes — Vince Mugnaio, Pilate Providence AKA 'The Big Brother', and Joe 'Deadpan' Salem.

The .45 was a frozen lump in my hand, piercing the skin, gnawing me to the bone. I commanded my legs to move, and they did.

I stepped over the fallen men. A side door stood open in the cold corridor ahead. I went in gun first. It was empty save for the man with the stake through his heart. I took a closer look. In death, the thug had been promoted to messenger. The note that lay between the stake and his chest read *SOON* in blood.

Someone hadn't enjoyed the Don's hospitality. Someone with a flair for the dramatic. Someone who had let themselves out of a locked cell and past a couple of armed guards. My thoughts were on Mona again. I could only hope the dame was a good enough gambler to walk away while she was still winning.

Before she ran into the Trio.

I made my way back through the corridor into the cellar. Wine racks filled with priceless bottles of grape juice, faded posters of the vineyards of the motherland. A stairway led up, so I took

it, creeping and listening for any sign of the manor's mad dogs. It wouldn't take long to run into the Trio.

At the top of the stairs was a large kitchen, all wooden cabinets and stainless steel pots and pans hanging from the cooking island. The place was large enough to output a restaurant's worth of food.

A set of tarot cards lay on the kitchen counter. The word on Lisa Punchinello was that she was a bit of a witch. From what I could see, the cards on the counter fit the picture. They weren't my kind of cards, but I was willing to take a crack at the hand Mrs. Punchinello had dealt.

The first card was a black structure — the Tower. Maybe that was supposed to be the manor. It got easy after that. The next card was the Devil, the master of the house, and the third card, Death, was me, coming for him.

A noise from the next room stole my attention from the fortune telling. If Mona was still in the manor there would be enough of a distraction for me to get Punchinello. Mona had an axe to grind, but I wanted the Don for myself.

I couldn't waste any more time playing it safe. I pulled the silenced Uzi from under my jacket, replacing the .45 in my holster. I had a grenade in each of my jacket pockets, parting gifts from the Russian. If I couldn't stuff them down the Trio's throat I would at least go out with a bang.

From somewhere in the manor came a scream—a woman's screams. That sent me over the edge. Screw the guns. I pulled one of the grenades from my pocket and ripped out the pin. I raised my foot and kicked the door to the next room in. The heavy oak paneled door flew open hitting a guy who was standing behind it. The man flew forward, knocking over a table as two other men dove to the ground. One of them I recognized as Pilate Providence. His coal skin contrasted with the pale white wash of the manor. The killer was all suit and tie and machine guns. I didn't want to tango with the maniac, so I sent the grenade in to do the negotiating. I dove behind the kitchen counter as the frag exploded, shattering all the nearby windows and sending a wall of wood shrapnel through the doorway.

I was up and on my feet, feeling the the familiar rhythm of this bloody dance. I launched myself through the wrecked doorway and the smoke, hands out before me, Uzi firing on full auto. There was the shape of Providence staggering through the debris, covered in blood. The rounds tore through him, finishing the job. His cold eyes went dead before I hit the ground.

One down. Three to go.

Unfortunately the other two men now decorating the room's walls hadn't been the other members of the Trio. They were still elsewhere in the manor.

I realized that I no longer heard the screams from upstairs, but the sense of urgency hadn't left me. I needed to get up there.

I reloaded the Uzi with a fresh clip. It was time to find the remaining Trio members. I ran from the burning room.

The irony that in one night I had already accomplished what the NYPD, DEA, FBI and every other law enforcement task force had tried and failed for decades to accomplish was not lost on me. I could only hope that my winning streak would last a little longer.

The next several rooms were all the same, ornamental decorations, fine antiques, expensive upholstery and enough paintings and sculptures to put the Metropolitan Museum of Art to shame. All of it bought with murder, and pain, and suffering.

I moved on, deeper.

The sweeping double grand staircase of the main hall was breathtaking. I couldn't imagine what it was like to live in such a place. I was sure it was possible to live entirely isolated in sections of the manor for days without seeing another person. This was the kind of money that bought bad cops, and bad judges, and bad politicians. The type of money that influenced election cycles and got bills passed in the Senate. This was old money, *blood* money. The recent influx of V had no doubt injected new life into the cash flow of the Don's assets. But with the extra dough and a lifestyle that would have made the Rockefellers envious, surely Punchinello was drawing unwanted attention. Had this been why Muerte was hired to take out the mayor?

It was all conjecture. In the end, it didn't matter who was plugging who just as long as I got to plug Punchinello.

I had lingered too long at the foot of the stairs. Joe Salem appeared, firing off shots at me before I could return the favor. I ducked behind a six-foot vase as it exploded into dust. The porcelain shrapnel stung my face.

"Give it up, Payne!" Deadpan called.

From my cover behind the staircase I replied, "Your trio just became a duet."

"Providence?" Joe Salem yelled.

"I wouldn't recommend an open casket!" I was stalling again, reaching into my pocket for the Russian's last explosive Babushka, trying to get Joe angry enough to trip down the stairs and into a bullet.

"I'm gonna rip your goddamned heart out and eat it!" he screamed. I heard him charge down the stairs like a raging bull.

I pulled the pin and tossed the grenade up over the banister. Seconds later it went off, tearing the stair rails to pieces. I covered my head as wood and debris rained down on me from above. Deadpan screamed as he flew through the air, landing on a grand piano, which exploded into a cloud of splinters and dust. The Trio was now a Solo.

Two down. One to go.

I got up and brushed off the dust and splintered wood. I was out of grenades, so the guns would have to finish the job. Somewhere upstairs were Punchinello and Vince, maybe even Mona.

I climbed what was left of the elaborate staircase, Uzi pointing every which way, trying to cover all the angles.

"Max Payne?"

The thug cried out in surprise. At the top of the landing one of Punchinello's men had come out of the woodwork to see what was happening. The rat was scurrying back through the door. I followed as fast as my feet would carry me.

As I reached the door I heard him crying out again.

"Payne's coming, he's killed Joey, there's no stopping the mad man! He's right behind me!"

"This will stop the bastard," another voice, cool and calm spoke. "This will stop anything. Take cover!"

I did thus likewise, diving from the door as it exploded into a million pieces. I hit a wall and potted plant on a pedestal. My bruised ribs sent a fork of lightning to my brain. My ears were ringing and I thought I could hear Michelle screaming.

Vince Mugnaio had fired some sort of grenade launcher *inside* the manor. Not the smartest move but I couldn't blame him for trying. Guns didn't seem to work against me.

I pulled myself up from the ground, shook off the soil. If I had burst through the door when Joey let rip with his new toy the NYPD would be scraping my remains off the back wall. As luck would have it Vince thought I was dead. He and his pal ran from the room to gloat over my corpse. I let them have most of the clip from the Uzi.

Vince caught the brunt of the gun's wrath, toppling over the banister and landing next to his fallen comrade with the sound of snapping neck bones, the other thug going down easy.

The Trio was done for.

The weapon they had used to redecorate the manor was an M67 miniaturized grenade launcher. Several grenade rounds were on a shelf in the room, so I picked the weapon from the spot Vince had dropped it before heading south and figured out how to reload it.

I wasn't kidding anyone, I was likely to kill myself with this beast as anyone else in the manor, but the sheer destructive capability of the rocket-propelled-grenade would make the task of taking down Punchinello all the more satisfying.

I'd finished loading the weapon when I realized for the first time that I was standing in the Don's bedroom. Although the thug's DIY job had left most of the entranceway in pieces, the bed was intact. On it was the source of the screams. I went to the body, felt for a pulse out of dumb hope. It was too late for her.

You're a real angel, Max.

Mona's voice in my ringing ears. I couldn't tell if this was her or her sister. The body was a mess. I picked up the sheets and pulled them over her. The sick bastard had really gotten a kick out of it. Seeing her lying there like that got me thinking about another woman's body on another bed. Got me thinking about a fallen cradle.

"...Outside my door! Hurry! He's coming for me! You've got to hurry. Please!"

Beyond the next door I could hear Punchinello on the phone, begging for help. He should have been saying his goodbyes. I kicked open the door. "Surprise!"

Disappointingly, the Don was a pushover. The moment I stepped into the room, he folded like a Deuce before a Royal Flush.

He was behind his large wooden desk, sweating buckets and shaking in his suit pants. "No, wait! I was just doin what I was told... Couldn't refuse. She's someone high up, government maybe, I don't know for sure."

He was trying to buy more sand for his hourglass.

I wasn't selling any.

Suddenly the Don's phone was ringing. His private line.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" I asked.

Punchinello looked incredulous through his fear. His shaking hand went for the phone. "Who...?" He stared at me in disbelief. "It's... for you."

I took the receiver. The voice on the other end was familiar to me.

“Max Payne?”

“Talk to me.”

“Alfred Woden. You’ve got company. An armed helicopter just landed on the manor grounds. You must hurry.”

“The more the merrier,” I said and threw down the receiver.

Punchinello, like a cornered animal, tried to make a run for it. He reached the door leading to the next room as I raised the RPG. Things were about to get messy.

Suddenly the Don was screaming. “No, I told em nothing!”

Then Punchinello was tumbling back through the door like a rag doll. Three guys with high powered rifles followed him in. I pulled the trigger on the RPG. Nothing happened. I dropped the stupid thing and reached for the .45.

“Drop it, don’t move!”

Suddenly I was surrounded by suits with assault rifles, so I put my hands up. I could tell when I was outgunned. It was time to take another beating.

“Game over, Max Payne.”

The mystery witch was a real barracuda. Trouble on dagger-heels. A smoking machine gun in her hand and an army of killer suits behind her. I thought I’d seen her face somewhere before, somewhere in the night.

“How sweet. I get to kill two birds with one stone.”

You stirred enough hornet’s nests and sooner or later it was going to catch up with you. The hag leaned in as her dogs restrained me, pinning my arms behind my back. She pulled a hypodermic needle from somewhere, the syringe filled with green liquid.

“Mister Payne, it’s time to show you the benefits of my brew,” she crooned. “Be a good boy now.”

The suits held my head back, exposing my neck. The witch stabbed me with the needle, sinking it into my jugular vein. The pain was searing.

Up to now luck had been on my side.

Now I realized that Lady Luck was really a hooker, and I was fresh out of cash.

Part III: *A Bit Closer* To Heaven

Valkyr O.D.

“Gentleman, we are done here,” the witch was saying. “Take me to Cold Steel.”

She had given me an O.D. of Valkyr. I could feel green fire eating my brains. The hag and her goons did a fade on me, turned to green steam. I never had a chance. The witch had got me as sure as if she’d put a gun to my head and pulled the trigger.

Then the shadows rushed me.

Bruised mugshot faces hungry for revenge loomed before my eyes. They knew my weak spots and closed in for the kill. The floor turned into a vortex of green blood.

THE FLESH OF FALLEN ANGELS!

I fell.



“Who’s there? Max? Max, is that you?”

The voice was familiar. I didn’t want to hear it, tried to shut it out.

It persisted.

“Max? Where are you, Max!? Please!”

I heard the crying, the tears.

“No, please, no! I’m sorry. Please don’t, Max, no!”

I had to block out the voices, focus on getting out of the manor. But the manor was a dark labyrinth in the seventh circle of Hell, and everything about it had become unfamiliar, skewed.

The white washed walls and decadent decor was bleeding green blood, my eyes burning with fire whenever I tried to focus on something real. Shadows clung to the walls, trying to flank me. I wouldn’t let them take me down.

I wandered around lost for what seemed like years. Every time I thought I had reached the exit I was back at the beginning again, and the whole bloody scene reset itself.

Disembodied, I watched myself crawl through the manor in third person. I tried to will that other me to take the right paths.

The bleeding green walls became oddly familiar. I recognized the Morris print wallpaper, the entranceway to my home. But it wasn’t my home anymore. And anyway, the dimensions were too big, stretched to nightmarish proportions. I moved forward as if I were floating on air and came to my living room. A letter was staring at me from the coffee table, strangely glowing in the darkness. I entered my body and peered at it.

There was something disturbingly familiar about the writing.

Max, none of this is real. It’s all in your head.

The truth split my skull open, a glaring green light washing the lies away. All of my past was a lie, I'd never been part of the NYPD, never had a wife and kid and the American Dream. I'd fantasized the whole thing. I was nothing more than a V-junkie. Funny as hell, it was the most horrible thing I could think of.

A phone next to the letter began to ring. I picked up the receiver.

"...bartender shiny stuff in dreams are made of stooped necromancers. Mr. Scratch sings like a banana wrist, having strayed too close to the constellations on their shaved skulls. It is not a lake, it's an ocean. The rain of frogs ended and the rain of blood comes down..."

It was a bad line and prank call. Someone spouting insane babble. I couldn't make sense of it, but that was probably because the phone I was holding wasn't a phone at all, but my gun. I was listening to the voices of the bullets.

It made sense, they were hungry for blood.

But I had an overwhelming sense of déjà vu, and the caller's voice had sounded oddly familiar. The familiarity of my living room had tricked me. I wasn't in my home, I was still in the Don's office.

That's when the blood streaming down the walls caught fire.

Suddenly the room was an inferno. The desk in front of me began to shake. There was something disturbingly familiar about the letter before me. The handwriting was all pretty curves.

Max, you died. You're in Hell.

The truth was a burning green crack through my brain. I'd died that night, confronting the murderers in my home. Of course it made sense now, how else had I survived this far without so much as a bullet wound, the way time kept doing that squishy thing, the feeling that everything was predestined, that I was doomed to repeat the same actions again and again and again. Funny as hell, it was the most horrible thing I could think of.

A phone next to the letter began to ring. I picked up the receiver.

"Don't lose it! It's Valkyr, the drug! Snap out of it! Try to remember!"

It was a bad line and prank call. Someone spouting insane babble. I couldn't make sense of it. But I had an overwhelming sense of déjà vu, and the caller's voice had sounded oddly familiar.

I couldn't stay here, not with the burning walls of fire. If I was in Hell I would find a way out, even if it took an eternity, I would find her, find my wife.

I left the Don's office to burn and ran into my bedroom. But it wasn't my bedroom, it couldn't be. He was in there, the mirror guy, the guy wearing my face.

"Murderer! You killed her!"

He raised his gun but I was quicker.

I was a murderer all right.

The guy wearing my skin fell to the ground and dissolved into a pool of green acid.

"Max, something happened at the office today. A strange memo, something about Vikings?"

I kissed Michelle. "Honey, I've got to run. You can tell me all about it this evening."

She smiled at me. "Have a nice day, darling."

I held her in my arms. The bullet holes were rubies on her chest, blood glowing on her ivory skin. She was so beautiful.

The killer was smiling. His smile cracked into a wide grinning cavern filled with dead bodies.

“The flesh of fallen angels!”

Take Me To Cold Steel

Slowly, the green nightmare faded, leaving dark stains on my soul that would never come off. When I finally came to I felt like flatlining.

I tried to move. I was all shook up, shivering in a cold sweat, sick and tired to the bone, lying in a puddle of my own puke. As soon as I moved I wretched again, but it was a dry heave.

The hag had said, “Take me to Cold Steel”, before it had all gone crazy. It was a clue, the only one I had left.



It took me forever to crawl back to my feet and hit the road. When I did, I drove straight to Cold Steel Foundry outside of the city.

The storm hadn’t lessened any, and there was a whole lot of action around the place for a freezing winter night. Trucks coming and going, men running.

I had the drop on the mystery witch, she thought I was dead. I was on her blindside.

The foundry was a fortress keep of light and noise, an island of light and warmth in the sea of darkness that had taken the city. It didn’t surprise me — a half-abandoned industrial area in the middle of nowhere. The foundry was a perfect front for any number of illegal activities.

I parked Frankie’s car and restocked on ammo and grenades. I put the Uzi away and went for the Colt Commando. If the guys who had wasted me back at the manor were anything to go by I was in for a fight.

I stood there for a moment in the freezing wind, trying to regain my senses. The bad trip had put me in a crazy mood, adrenaline pumping through my aching veins. There were a dozen ways into the compound, but I wanted to hit the roof and go in from there, take them by surprise, death from above.



Not ten minutes later and I was staggering on the mill roof in ice and snow and wild wind. I was a ninja, ready for anything.

My kung fu was strong.

Hell, I wasn’t kidding anybody. At best I was Superman on kryptonite about to fall through a skylight, down to where it all was going down. The skylight itself was a series of broken and cracked glass panels. Using the nuzzle of the Commando I scraped the largest of the broken fragments from its frame and slipped down into the darkness below.

Red spider webs in the blackness. The hag wasn’t as blindsided as I’d thought. The laser beams were triggers to wall-mounted mines that lined the door and the way out of the darkened

room. I stumbled around boxes and large crates, wishing for a flashlight, or better yet, a pair of infrared goggles. In the room beyond the eerie static of a radio stabbed at my hearing.

“...Life threatening weather conditions... a record-breaking killer storm... in the city's history... vehicles stuck in snow... heavy snowfall... forecast shows... severe weather is expected to continue...”

Continue it would.

Out in the night, snow fell like confetti over the Devil's parade. The storm was anything but over. That would slow down the commandos here at the foundry, but that didn't mean the hag would stick around for the whole show. I had to move fast if I was going to catch her.

I ducked behind a large, unmarked crate, raised the Commando at the wall-mounted mine closest to the doorway, sighted, shot. The explosion was powerful but compact, blowing chunks of cement from the walls.

I listened and waited from behind my hiding place for any of the witch's men to come running.

None did.

As I crawled out from the stacks of crates and forgotten boxes I wondered what exactly was going on here. If Cold Steel remained a foundry, a place for smelting and producing metals, then what did the mystery witch want with it? The only explanation was a front for Valkyr production. But that didn't make sense. If Punchinello had been singing true in his last desperate moments, then the hag was someone high up. *Maybe government*, the Don had said. Which begged the question: why would the government, or some secret organization, flood the streets of New York with a designer drug, funding a mob war between the Mafia and the Russian mob?

The questions would have to wait. For now I would continue to let the gun do the talking, and hope that, after it all came down, somewhere in the rubble and the blood the truth would be revealed.

The next room was an office type space, all metal grated flooring and cold green walls. Lockers lined one end of the room while safety equipment lay scattered around the desks, along with faded worker's rights posters and Health and Safety codes plastered to the walls. The radio I'd heard on my way in continued to sputter, so I turned it off.

The place looked abandoned all right, but there were scattered signs of new life. A discarded sea shell with a new occupant. Somewhere, in the belly of the plant, molten metal boiled and bubbled, like a witch's brew.

The office space had a large bay window offering a view of the facility below. I wasn't in the foundry section of the plant, that lay deeper still. This was the area for storing and moving cargo. Several massive containers with **COLD STEEL** painted on the side sat like forgotten buildings on the factory floor. Somewhere down there was a stairwell or an elevator to the hot depths and the hidden truths... And the hag's private army.

A burst of static from behind me caught me by surprise. I thought I'd turned off the radio.

“...Repeat, perimeter breached. The facility has been compromised, repeat, the Deep Six has been compromised. Initiate operation Dead Eyes.”

The walkie-talky military lingo meant only one thing. They knew I was here after all, and the hag was getting ready to destroy the evidence and vanish into the night. I threw the walkie-talky across the room. I was *so* close, closer than I'd been in years. The hidden truths were just around the

next corner. I left the office with renewed urgency, the fear of losing everything spurring me beyond reckless and into a rarely achieved zone reserved for kamikaze pilots and suicide bombers.

I raced to the bottom of the metal stairs to the production floor as the large steel doors of one of the shipping containers swung open. A figure in what looked like something Sam Fisher or some other Tom Clancy hero would wear to infiltrate enemy compounds strolled out, assault rifle in hand. His face was hidden behind a tight balaclava, body covered in close-fitting armor. I couldn't see his expression but his eyes went wide before narrowing.

Having reached the bottom of the stairs I dove headfirst to the ground, the Colt Commando unleashed a hailstorm of hollow points. Several connected with the guy, knocking him backward into the container. The heavy *Thunk, Thunk, Thunk* of my own assault rifle was deafening.

Things at Cold Steel were beginning to heat up. The lone commando was down for the count. Luckily for me he hadn't had time to radio his friends.

Next stop was the foundry.

Hidden Truths

The elevator was large and bathed in red light. In better days it had been used to move large amounts of materials and personnel from one level of the foundry to another. Now the platform groaned and rumbled from years of mal-maintenance.

When the doors rumbled opened I was ready for a half dozen mad-dog mercenaries with bazookas and samurai swords.

There was nobody.

I checked my corners and left the elevator. I was in a corridor of metal and emergency lighting. Ahead was a foreman's office.

Inside the office I looked for anything that would help me get to the witch. To my surprise there was a lot of paperwork on offer, way too much for me to leaf through in one sitting. One folder caught my attention, emblazoned with familiar symbols. The tale was grim.

Merchandise missing again. One of the chemists was caught trying to smuggle it out for his own private party. He's currently being held in cell B-7 in D-6's old test facility until proper processing...

The mercenaries were running a tight operation, paperwork and all. I was close enough to hear the secrets, just beyond the next doorway. If I survived long enough I would see behind the curtains of this shoddy play, beyond the smoke and mirrors.

Two voices broke my train of thought, from outside the foreman's office. I hid under a folding table, rifle ready.

The first voice was deep, calm, the voice of a professional mercenary, or so I imagined.

"Can you believe it? I bet those guys sleep with their rifles. Bet they've given them names!"

The response came from a younger man, less experienced, less sure of himself. "I guess. So, y-you don't have a name for your gun?"

The first guy snorted. "Hello? Hell no, you do?"

A shy laugh. "Well, kind of."

They were moving closer. My hands wrapped tighter around the gun until my fingers were white and burning.

"Really? Okay let's hear it," the professional said.

More nervous laughter, and now they were right outside the door. "Well, I call it 'Dick Justice'.

The professional half sighed, half groaned. "I rest my case."

It went quiet for a moment. I tried to control my breathing and listen above the noise of my heart thundering through my ears. Minutes passed and I was about to risk a gander when a burst of static froze me in place.

"Yeah, come in," the professional said. They were still there.

"Val, we're ready to go. Booby-trap in place, repeat, booby-trap in place. The oven controls have been destroyed. Obstacle in place. Move to alpha point, over."

“Roger that.”

The younger merc spoke up again. “You think he’s here?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the older replied. “He’ll be leaving in a body bag. Let’s move out.”

He was probably right.

I waited until the two were long gone and the cramp in my legs unbearable. Finally I rolled from underneath the table and stretched.

I didn’t know exactly what the trap the mercs had set for me involved. I’d have to be careful not to run headfirst into any more rooms rigged with laser trip mines.

I took a final glance around the foreman’s office. There was enough evidence there to form some of the connections — at least on the surface — but no time to sort through it. I needed concrete proof that the hag was behind Valkyr, and fast.

My only choice was to move forward.

I wasn’t a dozen steps from the foreman’s office when the heat and the noise of the foundry’s heart reached me. A dented metal door covered in blue and white hardhat signs led to a bare corridor. The lighting flickered for a moment, probably from the strained New York power grid. I absently wondered if the storm had gotten any worse.

The door ahead led me to a catwalk above the landscape of Hell.

Massive smelting cauldrons moved on hydraulic arms, carrying gallons of molten metal from one area to another. No one seemed to be manning the scene and I wondered why the mercenaries had gone to the trouble of restarting this infernal operation. Maybe the noise and the light and the heat provided a front for the secret activities below, maybe not. Possibly the mercs were using the foundry to destroy evidence in vats of pooling liquid metal, hot enough to destroy a terminator.

And the mercs *had* been busy. The catwalk circling the perimeter of the upper room had been destroyed, probably when I’d opened one of the doors in the previous corridor. The metal railings were twisted from a controlled explosion.

Since the V-overdose I hadn’t been at my steadiest, but the only way across the valley of death below was to traverse an I-beam like a tightrope walker in Hades.

The I-beams crisscrossed the upper room, providing the framework for the moving components of the smelting operation. The machinery of the chamber rumbled below me, a surging lake of burning demons ready to take me under with one misstep.

I edged out onto the closest beam, trying to keep the Colt Commando tight to my chest. The beam was wide enough to put both my feet side-by-side, but barely. I tried not to look down. If the witch’s private army were to find me now I was done for.

Blasts of heat from the furnaces rose in continuous waves, distorting my view and making my eyes water. I consoled myself with the promise that if I were to fall I’d be dead before hitting the molten vats below, killed instantly by the immense heat. With that in mind, I willed my right foot forward.

They say the trick to heights is to not look down. They were right. The urge to look was there, though, to know what lay below with each step. Instead I kept my eyes focused on the goal, the catwalk on the other side of the I-beam.

About halfway across I began to sense I was leaning too far left. I corrected, slowly, as not to overcompensate and plunge off the right side of the beam.

Easy.

Another giant cauldron of hot liquid metal rolled into the chamber from some other part of the foundry. I tried not to get distracted, but I realized with a sudden rise of panic that if the cauldron dumped its molten cargo into the lake of fire below I'd be caught in the ensuing firestorm.

I forced the panic into a small cold place and continued forward. Right foot, left foot, the cauldron overflowing with white-hot soup, trundling along hydraulic rails.

I was a foot away from the railing of the far catwalk when the worst case scenario became the scenario. Two mercs came in through the door, assault rifles swinging.

I had nothing to lose, I dove from the last foot of I-beam as the cauldron loosed its molten brew into the vats, sending up a column of steam and heat and noise.

The Commando thundered in my hands. The first merc's head snapped back as the second dove right for me. Time compressed down with familiar precision, presenting me with a slideshow of the action. In the moment of fire and death, the merc's body connected with mine. The physics were easy, and I twisted myself, allowing his body to pass over me and over the railing.

He vanished into a cloud of smoke.

He'd be dead before he hit the lake of fire, or so I kept reminding myself.

I staggered to my feet for what felt like the millionth time that night. I didn't know what lay beyond the next door — mines, mercs and guns were a safe bet — but I didn't care. I fell through the threshold coughing, my lungs burning. I knelt over, hacking up the devil's phlegm and trying not to pass out from the pain in my ribs.

When I'd composed myself enough to think I reloaded the Commando and took in my surroundings.

I was in a control room. This time the view offered not a bay window of a production floor but ranks of video monitors. The foundry's activity filled the control room screens, all but one. An elevator titled **D-6**. Somewhere onward, I guessed, past rows of ovens, in the core of the plant.

D-6. To me, the facility's name sounded like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I quickly scoured the room for any usable items and came up empty. Then I spotted a bottle of aspirin next to one of the control booths. I popped a few and dry swallowed, the throbbing in my side matching the throbbing in my skull. I had to hang on a little while longer, long enough for the pain to end.

I left the control room paranoid that every door would explode upon opening. Another stairwell took me down to a rusty platform that opened up to several rolling garage-style doors. I hit the control panel for the one marked CS-D-6 and rolled under the gate, which remotely shut behind me and locked. There were no controls on this side of the chamber, no way out but forward.



I'd been wrong. The smelting chamber with its cauldrons and vats had only been purgatory. Here was the real road through Hell.

I kept my head low, hand covering my face. I stood in a long corridor lined with blast furnaces — the ovens the mercs had mentioned on the radio. The furnace doors were opening and

closing at regular intervals releasing clouds of fire and smoke like ranks of belching demons. A narrow track ran the length of the corridor, either side covered in molten slag that pooled and overflowed from the ovens into deadly rivers.

There was no way through this Devil's obstacle course on foot. One step and I would be a black smudge on the wall. There wouldn't be enough of me left to stick a tag on at the city morgue, and the smell of burning hair was unsettling. But that's when my salvation arrived.

A mine cart appeared from a sliding compartment door, following the tracks on the ground. As the cart screeched past me I dove for it, hoping it would take me to the end of the row of ovens where I would jump out and make my way to D-6.

The only problem now were the mines.

So this was the booby trap the mecs had set. The familiar red laser beams of the trip mines ran the span of the oven-corridor. When the mine cart tripped the explosives I'd be flipped out of the cart like a burger on a flaming grill.

Bursts of fire roiled over my head. I poked the Commando over the top and tried to aim at the first mine. I tracked the red laser beam through the flames and smoke until I saw the ugly black mass on the wall.

Aim. Fire.

The mine exploded, compact and deadly. I ducked as debris hit the cart, which continued to roll along the track at a steady pace. I ducked farther still as another set of ovens let forth a volley of gaseous explosions.

The last set of mines were ahead. I found the next with ease and shot.

Ducked. Waited.

Things were heating up in the mine cart. I felt like a frozen pizza and I realized part of my leather jacket was smoking. I beat frantically at the smoldering patch, remembering the grenades and ammo clips in my pockets.

The last mine loomed ahead, ten feet, six feet. I shot at the black lump, missed. Fired again, missed. A wall of flame obscured my shot. I fired again anyway on full automatic.

I ducked down covering my head. The explosion rocked the cart hard. Then suddenly I was moving with renewed speed. I braced for impact.



The cloud of smoke lingered in the air.

"What the hell? The son of a bitch made it through!"

I crawled out of the fallen cart, which had derailed and sailed through the rollup garage door at the far end of the oven chamber.

I was on hands and knees, coughing, trying to stay conscious. The rifle lay a few feet away, behind the merc with the gun pointed to my head.

"It's Payne," the merc called.

"Kill him," a voice returned. "Bastard's given us a enough trouble."

The merc looked down at me, pressed the assault rifle to my head. It was over. I could almost see their faces, Michelle and the baby.

“Report to Alpha,” the merc with the gun to my head instructed. “I’ll take care of our *hero* here.”

“But *she* said—”

The merc looked sharply at his companion. “Do it. On the double.”

“Yes, sir,” the other replied. I heard him leave.

Now it was me and the merc and the gun to my head.

“Any man who survived what you just survived is either bat-shit insane, or on a crusade.”

“I don’t know anymore,” I replied. It was the truth.

The merc paused for a moment. I didn’t take my eyes off him.

“Get up,” he finally said.

Didn’t want me to die on my knees. Well, that was something with these ex-military types, all honor and codes. I tried to stand.

“There’s an elevator up ahead. That’ll take you where you need to go.”

My brow knitted together in confusion. The merc picked up my Commando and tossed it to me.

“A lot of my guys didn’t come back from the Gulf,” the merc said. I couldn’t see his face behind the black balaclava but his blue eyes were piercing. I recognized the horror in them. It was my own, reflected back at me.

I nodded.

The merc grabbed the radio on his chest. “Target eliminated.”

“*Understood, proceed to Alpha point.*”

The merc did as he was told, leaving me in the smoldering ruins of the garage. Before he left through the maintenance door he turned to me and said, “Good luck... Sir,” and saluted me.

Then he was gone.

The Deep Six

The D-6 elevator doors rumbled open. I moved inside. There were no controls. The doors closed and down I went.

I had taken on the role of the Mythic Detective: Bogart as Marlowe, or Sam Spade going after the Maltese Falcon to unravel all the mysteries. Following a path of clues to the final revelation, even if it would take me down to the cold, cavernous depths of a grave.

I reloaded the Colt Commando with one of my last clips. I didn't know who was left down there. My guess was anyone the witch thought of as expendable or collateral damage, which was anyone.

The elevator slowed before stopping. When the door rumbled open I was in a new world. Gone were the hellish ovens and smoking chimneys. This place was all high-tech, sleek carpeting and glass doors. It looked like a Silicon Valley office building.

Beyond the glass partition I saw three men standing in a circular chamber. Two of the men were suits with Berettas. The other man wore a lab coat. They were arguing.

"Well, you can't do this, my men are still inside!" the lab coat was saying.

One of the suits laughed, cold as ice. "Do you have any idea why this is called Operation Dead Eyes?"

The two suits aimed their guns and fired. The white lab coat was suddenly red with blood. One of the suits continued to fire until his gun was empty. "Hate scientists."

"I think he's dead already," the other said.

"It's catching," I called, firing the Commando at the two murderers. I wasn't under any delusions. I'd taken enough lives since this whole thing began to make serial killer blush. But killing unarmed scientists to cover up your murderous projects, projects that had ripped apart my family, was beyond the realm of good and evil.

The suits went down, stone cold dead. I was glad. As their blood pooled on the floor I realized I was standing on the insignia for this demonic militia. A giant V with a doubled-edged sword through the middle. I'd seen the logo before, a thousand variations of it on crumbling brick walls everywhere in the city, the sword replaced by a syringe. Project Valhalla. V for Valkyr, V for Valhalla. All of a sudden it read like a crackpot conspiracy theory.

The room went dark. Emergency lighting flickered into being as an alarm klaxon sounded. A voice crackled over the speakers. "*Abort, abort! The self-destruct sequence has been initiated! Get the hell out of here!*"

I headed for the nearest door. I didn't know where I was going or what exactly I would find in the military bunker under the steel mill. Whatever it was would have to be enough. Now, more than ever, I needed a reason for my family's murder.

The sleek lobby lead to what looked like a medical facility. The corridors were white and sterile, the equipment expensive and well kept. Rows of cubicles lined one room, which had been ransacked. Bodies in bloodied lab coats lay slumped against computer consoles, their eyes dim and accusing. One of the monitors flashed brightly in the darkness. A chemist had been using the

workstation when he'd died. The half-life of the lab rat had ended online, his password blinking on the screen.

665, the neighbor of the beast.

I left the offices and continued ahead. Boxes were scattered across the floor, their files spilling out in random piles. It would take an army of attorneys to discover what exactly had been going down in the Deep-Six facility. I didn't have a chance in Hell of finding the truth in this mess.

I reached a set of double doors marked CELL BLOCK A, a keypad on the wall blinking idly by. I remembered the memorandum I'd found. One of the lab rats was locked up in here, cell B-7. I typed 6-6-5 on the keypad. To my surprise the doors opened.

"Hey!" a voice cried. "In here, hey! Get me outta here, I'm innocent!"

The cell block was cold, white. Some of the cells were occupied by what used to be human beings. They rocked back and forth in rags, mumbling insane mumbo-jumbo. V-heads, through and through. Test subjects.

"In here!"

The voice was coming from the cell marked B-7, as promised. The keypad on the cell door was similar to the one outside.

"Who are you?"

"Max Payne."

"The code's—"

"Six-Six-Five," I said. "Neighbor of the Beast."

"Right!" the lab rat said. "I thought I was gonna die in here for sure."

"I need you to get me through to the archives, wherever they have the files on the V test subjects, project information, that sort of thing."

Through the little window of the cell door the chemist looked panicked. "You're crazy! No way, the place is blowing up!"

I shrugged. "Either that, or I leave you in the cell. Your choice."

"Yeah, sure, okay!" the scientist said. "But let's go, man. Someone set the auto destruct, and we've got like 10 minutes to get clear or we're dead."

I pushed the right buttons and the door opened. The chemist looked whiter than his lab coat. "We gotta move, man!"

He made to leave. "What about the others?" I said.

The chemist looked around. "These guys? Are you kidding me? They're better off dead, believe me. They already think they *are* dead!"

He ran through the door back out of the cell block. I followed, trying to ignore the cries and sobs of the cell occupants.

"Where are we going?"

The chemist didn't stop. "I'm going to have to send you to the labs. You'll need to get through the decontamination chamber. It's right this way, I'll punch you through."

I did as the chemist said, following him into another room.

“Get in,” he said, nodding to a glass door. I stepped inside, into what was essentially a glass chamber with another door at the end of it.

A computer voice began to speak. “*Decontamination in progress...*”

“Shield your eyes,” the chemist called.

Suddenly the room filled with mercs. Then the glass of the chamber filled with bullet marks as they fired their assault rifles at me. I ducked, trapped in the chamber until the cycle had completed. The scientist’s screams were cut short.

The decontamination chamber finished its cycle and I ran from the sound of machine guns.



The decontamination chamber led me through to a room filled with computer terminals, ranks of filing cabinets. The place had been trashed as heavily as the previous areas, the mercs taking anything related to the project. I moved carefully through the darkness. More red laser beams filled the back of the room, crisscrossing their way from wall mounted mines. I was caught in the middle of the deadly web that was the Valkyr case.

One of the lab terminals had the project logo on the screen. I sat at the desk, careful not to make too much commotion, clicked through the files, opened a few, scanned the info.

Top secret. Project Valballa, U.S. Army: Yggdrasil Network...

Valballa: The otherworldly place in Norse Mythology where the bravest heroes spend their afterlife feasting and fighting forever, their wounds miraculously healed night after night...

Valkyr: The maidens who choose the most courageous Viking warriors and carry them to Valballa.

1991: The research objective is to create a chemical substance stimulant designed to enhance the stamina and morale of the infantry troops...

1995: Results unsatisfactory...

Project Cancelled.

Someone had decided to continue the sick experiment unauthorized. I clicked the next files.

Project compromised... Assess data leak. Fix the damage by any means necessary. Security clearance red. Authorized by project lead...

Field-test, double the dosage for all the remaining test subjects. Observe and record the subject’s behavior in an urban setting...

The drop-off point was my old address in New Jersey, the file dated three years ago. Just when you thought you had reached the deepest depths of horror, it suddenly got worse.

I leaned back from the computer screen in a daze.

How to turn off that small voice inside your head that started to whisper that you should be *glad*, that now, if not before, your revenge was justifiable on any conceivable moral scale? That small voice proved, beyond any doubt, that I was damned.

I got up from the station. This was it, there was nothing else here for me. The dagger—healed woman had come and gone a long time ago, and the bunker's name was indeed acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The alarm klaxon whirled overhead. A voice spoke from the PA system. “Self-destruct now immanent. There will be no more warnings. Repeat, self-destruction is immanent.”

I heeded the voice's warning. It was time to take the elevator back to the surface, back to where it had all began. I reloaded the Colt Commando with my final clip and ran for the decontamination suite. Any killer suits or mercs would be long gone by now, or so I hoped.

I grimaced against the pain and fled.

Backstabbing Bastard

The elevator ride was an express train from Hell to the surface.

Cold Steel went off with a bang. The majority of the explosion was deep underground where walls of fire were busy incinerating all the remaining links in the chain of the Valkyr case. I let my legs carry me from the facility as far as they would go. I collapsed in the snow and watched the flames rise from the foundry.

You piece together a jigsaw and the completed picture is you finishing the same puzzle. A mad, green-eyed killer standing behind you. John Mirra or Mr. Scratch. An urban legend come true. The project Valhalla test-subjects were the mad junkies who had murdered my loved ones. The rest was simple body count math. It all pointed to her: Ms. Valkyr.

The foundry continued to explode in a fiery inferno behind me. All my leads were dead, turned to smoke and dust. I had lost my way. I hadn't slept in a million years.

I felt thin as death. I'd been living on an endless supply of week-old donuts and coffee. They were fuel for this crazy furnace inside my head.

Suddenly I couldn't remember the last time I'd see the sun. I'd been on a permanent graveyard shift. When the darkness fell, New York City became something else. Any old Sinatra song notwithstanding. Bad things happened in the night, on the streets of that other city.

Noir York City.



I was in an all-night diner downing cup after cup of coffee that tasted like engine oil when a new message from B.B. got me back on the killer track.

The pay phone was a beat up antique, but the connection was good. B.B. was all schmooze and charm. "What the hell happened at Roscoe street, Maxey?"

I glanced around the diner. Some of the tired-eye patrons were glancing at me. I looked as disheveled as any V-head in need of a fix.

"I was set up."

"Maxey," B.B. crooned, "I'm going out on a limb here. We need to talk this through. Come up with a plan."

"What are you suggesting?" I asked.

"Two-thirty AM, the Choir Communications' Garage."

"Sure."

I hung up the phone. I should have seen it coming a thousand miles away. The more I thought about Alex's murder and my frame-up, the more it felt like an inside job. I remember the call I'd gotten from B.B. to meet Alex at Roscoe Street Station before everything went noir. Alex hadn't arranged the rendezvous, and the press had found out before the body was cold.

Yeah, I should have seen it coming. B.B. had sold me out, and now he wanted to finish what he'd started.



The Choir Communications' garage was dead. The snow continued to fall, visible in the glow of the sodium lights.

B.B. showed up as promised sporting his tailor-made suit, gold watch and cufflinks to match. All way beyond a cop's pay.

"Maxey! Where have you been? You look like death."

Oozing suave charm, he was guilty as hell.

"What does B.B. stand for anyway?" I asked, "Backstabbing Bastard?"

The DEA agent's face fell. "Come on, don't be like that. Have a cigar." He offered me an expensive cuban.

"I don't smoke," I said.

B.B. shrugged, lighting his own and taking a drag. "Maxey, you have no idea how big this is. It's huge, you have no idea."

"I think I do," I said. "You're a bribe-taking bent cop who sold out his partner. Those mobsters in the subway were a dead giveaway, B.B., hard to miss." I put two fingers to my head like a gun. "Bet it was exactly like *this* with Alex, wasn't it? Up close and personal."

B.B. shook his head, grinning, the snow collecting on his black coat. "You can't win this one, Max."

I nodded. "No. But I can make damn sure none of you do, either."

B.B. took a swing at me. It was a distraction only. A black sports car was hurtling toward us through the snow and ice followed by a black van.

I hit the deck, almost becoming a hood ornament. B.B. jumped in the sports car and his driver sped them away.

A bad cop on the take. A cowardly right-hand man fleeing from the scene, leaving his paid thugs to do his dirty work. The worst part of all was that I wasn't surprised by any of it.

The van's doors slid open. I had a surprise for them, a grenade from the Russian. I silently thanked Vlad as I hurled the frag into the van. The first mook hit the snow as the vehicle exploded from the inside, engulfing everything in flame, including the front end of Frankie's wheels.

Car or no car I wasn't about to let B.B. get away, not after Alex. Not after tonight. I went after the sports car on foot, hoping I could reach the bottom of the parking garage before B.B. made it out.

I grabbed the Colt Commando from the trunk of the burning car, Captain Baseball Bat Boy grinning at me from the bumper. There were more goodies in the vehicle, but they'd soon be lost to the flames. I couldn't be greedy, so I packed fresh Commando clips tightly in my pockets. The .45 was snug against the left side of my chest, the Uzi, sans silencer, against my right. It was as much as I could carry without disabling myself. I hoped it would be enough.

The Choir Comm garage was a multistory parking lot filled with black slush and white fleet vehicles. It hadn't been difficult getting in but getting out would be a scream.

I trudged through the snow and ice to door marked EXIT. The stairwell led down, and I took it two at a time, despite the slush. At the bottom I burst through the door and into the lower level of the garage. There I saw the black sports car, which had gone toe-to-toe with red sedan and crashed into one of the support pillars.

In his rush to flee, B.B. had made a fatal error.

The man of the hour was limping from the vehicle, coming straight at me with a wild look in his eyes, blood running from a gash at his temple.

"Maxey, Maxey, Maxey. We have to stop meeting like this." He raised what looked like a cannon and fired it at me. The automatic shotgun exploded the wall behind me as I dove for cover behind a parked car. Then it was raining safety glass.

"You know, I really hate people who refuse to see the inevitable. Dinosaurs who can't adjust to the new world. Well, we all know what happened to the dinosaurs, don't we, Maxey?"

The cliches were flying as thick as the bullets from B.B.'s gun and the car was fast becoming Swiss cheese. I had to move.

"People who refuse to do the smart thing, the *right* thing," B.B. continued whining. "I blame you, Maxey. You know, for a smart guy, you can be so thickheaded!"

Automatic shotguns may break my bones, but names will never hurt me. I scrambled behind more parked cars, staying low to the ground.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

BOOM.

Car alarms were going off left and right. I was fast running out of vehicles to duck behind on this side of the garage. The only choice was to get really low, down in the oil stains and cigarette butts. I went as flat as possible, the Commando out in front of me. I scanned between the tires and hubcaps until I saw the expensive Italian shoes. B.B.'s legs.

I let off a burst, and B.B. went down screaming.

I got out from the car and ran to the coward, kicking the cannon from his side. The Commando rounds had shattered the bones as sure as a speeding car to the shins would have.

"It's over, B.B."

"Go to Hell, Max!" The suave charm was gone. All that was left was fear and hate. You scrape away enough at a man and all you're left with is the basics. "Y-you're too late..."

I leaned in close, pulling at the expensive shirt and tie. "Why Alex? He was your partner, damn it. He was my *friend*!"

He was right, it *was* too late. He was gone. B.B. bled out on the parking garage floor.

I went to his crashed sports car. The driver inside was dead, but not from the crash. There were three rounds in his chest. The price of failing B.B. Backstabbing Bastard.

The car radio was still on.

“Reports of a fire at the Punchinello Manor in Westchester. The Manor is home to Angelo Punchinello, the alleged head of the Punchinello crime family. The police are now saying, contrary to their earlier statements, that rogue DEA agent Max Payne is in fact still alive and at large. He continues his vendetta against the Mafia, of which this last act of arson is being attributed to...”

I had no recollection of setting any fires, but I did remember the flames.

A pay phone on the wall behind me began to ring. Part of me wasn't surprised at all. I went to it and picked up the receiver.

“Woden?”

“Max Payne?” the voice asked.

I glanced around the parking garage for any sign of B.B.'s friends, not wanting to get blindsided. “Whatever does it for you.”

“I can give you the name of your enemy. Come to the Asgard Building, presently. We are expecting you.”

The call ended.

In The Land Of The Blind

When I arrived, Woden was waiting for me on the steps of the building. The old man was smiling, confident. One of the lenses of his spectacles was black. I remembered Candy Dawn's 'One Eyed Alfred' line. I shivered.

"Mister Payne, let's go inside, shall we?"

"Sure, beats this weather," I said.

"Quite," Woden said, opening the door for me. He raised his arm to usher me in. "The others are anxious to begin."

"Others?"

The old man ignored my question. "Despite the general misconception, this building actually predates City Hall by two years, thus being the oldest municipal building still in use, here at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge."

"No kidding?" I let the old man play tour guide as he led me through a darkened domed hall. I was barely listening. The answers I was after loomed large ahead.

Woden showed me into a briefing room through an oak paneled door. Inside it was all plush-carpeting and leather armchairs, oak paneled walls with richly-carved coving. A group of grey-haired balding men waited inside, some sitting, some milling around, all of them anxious looking. I was as out of place here as a V-head on the Senate Floor.

Woden put a hand on my shoulder. "Mister Payne, I would like to introduce you to my colleagues in what we call 'The Inner Circle'."

I suppressed a grin. "You've been watching too much X-Files."

But Alfred wasn't smiling. "You've seen the files on Project Vahalla."

I nodded. "Cold Steel. Deep Six."

Alfred pointed at a projection screen. "Sit. We can fill in the gaps, provide you with the information missing from those files."

"I prefer to stand," I said, moving to the back of the room by the window. Outside the snow was hitting the glass, sticking to it in white clumps.

Alfred played the first slide. An Aesir Corp. logo appeared. "We were all involved with the early stages of the project, during the Gulf War."

The old man continued with slides that showed military test subjects, smiling scientists. I recognized some of the shots from the D-6 labs.

"What's the catch?" I asked.

Alfred peered at me with his one eye. "We would very much like to blow this thing wide open, Mister Payne."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because our hands are tied." Alfred looked around the room at his colleagues, who nodded and hung their heads.

I said, "I see, you want me to act as your conscience?"

"In a sense," Woden said. "You'd be helping to clean up a terrible mistake, a mistake born of naivety on our part, a desire to better our country."

"Who's the woman?" I asked as a slide appeared depicting the mystery hag. She was younger here, but her eyes burned with the same green intensity I had seen at Punchinello's manor.

"Nicole Horne. She's president of Aesir Corporation. I won't lie to you, Mister Payne, she has more than half the city in her pocket."

That didn't surprise me in the least. But now I had a name, a reason to continue, if only for a while longer.

"Mister Payne, if you do this, this must be kept under wraps. If you try to go public with this, with us... We'll deny any knowledge. We need you to take her out. Afterwards we can protect you, make all the charges go away."

That was the cue for the killer suits to kick in the doors and swarm inside. Within seconds they were blasting the members of the Inner Circle. It was an impressive floor show, but I decided to leave early.

I covered my face with my leather jacket and dove through the old window, the sound of gunfire on my tail. The drop was about six feet into a snow bank that saved my neck. I unrolled into it and got to my feet, staggering as the sound of death played out above.

I was in the inner courtyard of the building. A giant fountain sat in the middle, snowbound and frozen. I ran up the steps to the first door I saw. Locked. Tried another, locked again.

I caught sight of a cellar door, probably used for unloading from inside the building to the courtyard. One of the doors was open and warm light shone from inside. I dove inside as the suits from the room above began to take pot shots at me.

Inside was a basement stacked with boxes, cobwebs clinging to the walls. I made my way through and up the stairs to the carpeted hallways of the Asgard Building.

Snooping for an exit I found instead the old man's office room, marked A. WODEN in big gold lettering. I peeked inside. Dark. I moved in and closed the door behind me. I wasn't ready to pass up an opportunity to dig through the mystery man's secrets.

Inside were banks of glowing monitors, CCTV feeds from the rest of the building. One of the monitors showed what was left of the Inner Circle. On screen, the so-called corpse of Alfred Woden stood up, miraculously waking from his dirt nap, looking smug among his dead pals. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. I didn't know how he'd pulled it off, but it was a pretty slick way to get out of all his promises. Still, it was the only lead I had left, and most of what he had said fit too well to be a load of crap.

A small radio was fritzing away on the solid oak desk. I risked turning it up a little, raising my periscope for a peek at the world outside this nightmare.

"...And what is your answer to those saying that he is actually providing a service long overdue to the city?"

The question was laden with suspense. To my surprise, the man doing the answering was Bravura. "There'll be no crusaders in this city. He is out of control. It must stop and we will stop him. That's all I've got to say."

“That was Deputy Chief Jim Bravura speaking to us from the New York City Police Department...”

I shut the radio off. Poor Jim, ready for a coronary. I did regret all the pain I was causing him and the rest of the boys at the NYPD. A million years ago I knew what it felt like to be one of the good guys.

A DVD lay on the desk next to a photo of Woden and woman who was maybe his wife, maybe his mistress. Nicole Horne, the mystery witch, had no doubt blackmailed the Inner Circle into silence, having the dirt on any number of their less than perfect personal lives.

Woden was not immune. The DVD came with a curt extortion note on a piece of expensive paper. I remembered Candy Dawn again, taping her clients in action on the side, selling the tapes to the highest bidder. I was sure that kinky sex was nowhere near Alfred Woden's worst sin. But I had a feeling that, when this all over, any collateral would come in handy. I pocketed the disc.

That wasn't all Woden had left me. The old man had taken care of my mission preps with military precision, leaving me with a schematic of the Aesir Corp building. Critical areas of the HQ were circled in red. The president's office was at the top of the building, right below her penthouse suite. The written notes scribbled in blue ink said the elevators were controlled by a security computer, part of the mainframe located underground below the building. But judging from the blueprints the high-rise was sealed as tight as a sci-fi fortress. I folded the prints and pocketed them also.

Thanks, Alfred.

I was done with Asgard. It was time to make like a ninja.

Byzantine Power Game

I had dreamed of revenge. Those dreams were always nightmares, of coming close and then failing. Now I was close. I had a name to guide me. Nicole Horne. I had nothing to lose.

Project Valhalla had not been the only thing the Inner Circle was involved in, I was sure of that much. The serpentine society went back a long way, always pulling the strings from the shadows. Woden's move in some byzantine power game had cut the circle's membership roster to one. I couldn't say I was sorry. The old man wanted me on cleanup duty. After all, it was my mess now, too.

Getting out of the Asgard building alive was also my mess. Horne's death squad had swarmed the place, covering the exits. All I had was my .45 and the Uzi. That was okay, because I had revenge on my side. And every one loves an underdog.

Outside the old man's office I heard the voices of the witch's mercs. I crept to the door, guns ready.

"CIA, FBI, you've seen one agency you've seen them all. Good for a practice run. But this...Working for her? Oh, this is the real thing. The money's astronomical. And best of all, you get to kill any scumbag who gets in your way. License to kill, like James Bond."

I wasn't getting out that way. I returned to the desk to try and think of a plan of action. I had everything I needed to take the hag down. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

A small red button under Woden's desk caught my attention. Panic button maybe? Not the old man's style, he didn't seem capable of panicking. Against my better judgement I pressed the button. One end of a long, black leather sofa rose into the air, revealing a stairway down to another level. I moved down into it before the mercs had time to investigate the noise, the sofa closing over my head almost instantly.

The walk-in basement was a darkened bondage dungeon better suited to the Ragna Rock scene. Chains hung from the ceiling, along with all manner of whips and appliances. A leather bed with a rubber mattress sat in one corner. It wouldn't take long for the mercs upstairs to figure out where I'd gone. I didn't hang around to investigate the old man's pleasure palace.

A locked door at the back of the room led to a wood paneled corridor. This was Woden's escape hatch, or a secret way to have his playmates get into the office without being seen. Either way it was my exit.

The corridor led to a another stairwell incased in thick frosted glass bricks. I took it, aware that Horne's dogs were sniffing all over the building. As if on cue, two mercs in black flack jackets were waiting for me at the bottom.

The .45 and the Uzi let off deafening explosions in the narrow stairwell. I caught both mercs in the back of the head before they had a chance to turn around. More would be on the way.

I ran from the stairwell. The crazy building was immense but I had an idea I was heading in the right direction. A few security doors later and I was back out in the domed lobby where Woden had first shown me around.

Except now it was full of hired guns. Nicole Horne's private army was waiting for me.

Before the mercs could react to my presence, another distraction came on the scene. Men in black turtle necks and beanies stormed the front building, bursting through the metal detector

doorways with all manner of hi-res hardware. I knew immediately who they were. The Russian mob. Vlad had come.

The ensuing fire-fight was over relatively quickly. Several of the Russians caught the wrong end of the merc's assault rifles, but the law of attrition held. In moments the domed lobby of the Asgard building was a no-man's land of bodies.

And in through the middle of it all stepped Vladimir, cool as ice.

"Max! Dearest of all my friends."

I shook my head. "Hell of a risk you took coming here."

"Ah, it was nothing. A little pay back. Personal."

I was shocked. "You know these guys?" I indicated the dead mercs at my feet.

"Not so much, but I have a score to settle with a certain one-eyed snake."

Woden and Vlad. An odd couple. I didn't have time to question the relationship. Never look a gift horse in the mouth.

"You saved my bacon, Vlad."

"And you have proved your usefulness once more. Max, you are a true professional. I'll buy you a drink. I'm thinking of opening a restaurant downtown. What with Punchinello's place out of commission. Think of the opportunity!"

I nodded. "Always business with you, isn't it Vlad?"

The Russian's eyes darkened. "Always."

Nothing To Lose

Admittedly, mine wasn't the most original approach to the problem.

It wasn't as if it hadn't been all done before. An eye for an eye, the first principal of revenge. Old as dirt, and still going strong. But the cardinal rule in going after someone with the intention to kill was not to make it personal, which it almost always ended up being anyway.

It did with me.

After Vlad dropped me off near the Aesir building I walked around the block in the snow. There was no hurry. I knew what I had to do now.

I took my time. Thinking about it. Building up the rage until the frigid air had numbed my wounds and the pain was a small ball of fire in the pit of my stomach.

When I was ready I headed to the front doors of the Aesir Corporation HQ, got in, got cracking. I had a bullet with Nicole Horne's name on it. I had ten thousand bullets with the hag's name on them. She had ultra-high-tech security systems, enough mercenaries and weaponry to start World War III.

There was no fear.

New York disappeared behind a veil of snow. I had crossed the threshold. This was her domain. Sleek and sexy and soulless, all glass and polished steel. A place of color-coded security keycards, metal detectors and surveillance systems. Colder than a walk-in fridge.

Cold as a gun.

Vlad had made me resplendent in weaponry. I was packing full heat, including a shiny new Colt Commando packed with hollow points. I walked straight through the metal detectors without a second thought. Then the alarms sounded.

Security guards in flack suits burst from a side door. I took aim as time slowed to an infinitesimal point in space. The assault rifle was an extension of my being. The bullets found their targets without hesitation, with precision. More men came from the left, 9mms firing past my ears. I unloaded the Commando on them as they rushed me, the bullets hitting like bowling balls. Strike.

The elevator ahead was active. I stepped in. Reloaded.

The blueprints Woden had left me made it clear that the mainframe was in the basement. It would be a few hundred bullets from there to Horne's office. This elevator wouldn't take me to the lower basement, though, only the sub-basement offices where the IT guys hung out. The elevator that I needed was clearly marked on the schematics. Woden had done his homework.

When the doors opened I dove from the elevator cart, Commando ready. There was no point playing it safe anymore, not now. The elevator doors ahead of me opened up. I was a heartbeat from unloading into the cart.

"Mona? Looking good." I tried to hide my surprise.

"Max," she said, smiling. "We gotta stop meeting like this."

Suddenly the hag's voice was coming over the airwaves. A PA system whined to life. "It will be a cold day in Hell before I let a narc cop stop me. Miss Sax, do your job!"

I flinched.

“Relax, Max. You’re a nice guy. I don’t kill nice guys.” She lowered her weapon.

I lowered the Commando. “You’re not bad yourself.”

Mona looked away from my gaze. There was something in her face, something she was trying desperately to avoid. “It was different when Horne wanted Punchinello dead, to cut her ties to the Mafia. He deserved to die.”

I stepped closer. I could smell her perfume. “So does Horne. She’s the bad guy here.”

Mona bit her lower lip. Her sister was whispering to her in my favor. I knew the appetites of ghosts intimately. They hungered for revenge.

“Max!” Suddenly Mona grabbed my arm and pulled me aside. Two shots rang out from her gun.

“Mona!” She fell back into the elevator cart in slow motion. She was a nice girl, not really a stone-cold killer, and now she was stone-cold dead.

The doors rumbled closed on her.

Like Sardaukar or loyal Samurai, Horne’s private army was coming after me. I let the Commando repay the favor they’d shown Mona. Two guys went down, then a third.

When the elevator came back down, Mona was gone. There was some blood, but no body. In that moment, in the cold realization that everyone I cared for was dead, something clicked for the final time. My mind had never been so clear, as if somewhere high above the storm clouds were already gone, cold stars blazing from the black skies like diamonds on pitch.

I headed back along the corridor to the service elevator, the one Woden had marked in defiant red ink. From down there I’d be able to override the security locks and get to Horne’s office, or so I dared to hope.

I stepped inside, reloading the Colt as quickly as possible. Luck and magic were on my side, but any one of the bullets heading in my direction could break the spell. I had to finish this and fast.

The elevator doors opened to the sound of two men talking. I snuck out and hid in the shadows, plucking a grenade from my pocket. Beyond the glass partitions I saw the fat towers of the mainframe and the guards shooting the breeze. I was no hacker, I would have to shut down the system the old fashioned way. I pulled the pin from the frag and rolled it into the middle of the room. It wobbled along the ground in a nice arc, coming to rest by the feet of one of the guards.

They had no time to react.

The glass partition vaporized as the mainframe erupted in a silicon shower. Another guard ran down a metal stairwell from the upper level as the lights dimmed. I shot him from my position behind what was left of the glass wall. His body tumbled down the remaining steps, stopping dead at the bottom.

Horne’s locks were now off-line. All bets were off. My IT job over with I moved back to the banks of elevators. One of them was marked ROOF. I pressed the button and stepped in. The elevator would take me all the way up.

The ride up proved interesting. The back of the elevator cart was glass, along with the outer shaft. Seen from this height, the night seemed to stretch on to eternity. A hint of desperation had crept into the snow storm, as if it was trying to get it all out before the end.

I heard the helicopter before I saw it. A thundering roar of rotors and engines, the chopper appeared before me, following my skyward progress. A machine gun mounted to the underside of the cockpit began to spin up. I hit the deck.

The noise was all-consuming. Glass crashed around as the elevator shook and wobbled. I poked the Commando out into the freezing wind and fired off a clip at the buzzing hornet of steel and glass. The chopper swiveled and rocked before pulling away from the tower. I'd injured the beast, but it would be back.

What remained of the elevator cart finished its ascent. I stood up in a pool of broken safety glass.

The doors opened to a wide wood-floored office that looked like a model Ikea home. Nicole Horne was nowhere to be seen.

I walked out into the middle of the airy space, taking it all in. The hag's desk was uncluttered, with only a dual monitor system set up as a workstation. Horne's personal computer was still on. Next to the printer was a neat stack of expensive paper.

Hacking through Horne's computer would have unearthed files on criminal activity, strategies for world domination, spy helicopter reports, drone sightings, political dirt on the president and the entire White House, illegal wiretap recordings, Internet porno...

All of the above. Take your pick, I really didn't care anymore. I had seen too much of it already.

I raised my gun at the screen, blasted the monitor into burning scrap.

Pain And Suffering

I moved to another elevator at the rear of the large office. Horne would be up there in her oversized penthouse, ready to escape into the night.

Valkyr had meant to be a white-winged maiden that would lift you to a warrior's haven. But it had turned out to be a one-way demon ride to Hell. The Devil was in the drug. I knew, I had met him. The Queen of the underworld had tried to lift herself a bit closer to heaven with her drug money.

And now I was going to kill her.

There'd be no begging, no bribes, she knew better than that. Honor among killers. 'We who are about to die'. Both of us knew how this would end. In pain and suffering.

I reloaded the Commando for what I hoped was the last time.

The doors rolled open. I raised the gun at the image of Horne. She stood behind a thick glass wall, the access door closed and locked with electronic bolts and high-tech gadgetry. She was surrounded by suits with assault weapons.

"All this because your wife stuck her nose into things that were none of her business," she said, almost regretfully.

Outside, the swell of sirens was like a bad conscience I couldn't shake. The cops were coming to take me away.

"It's utterly ridiculous you've made it this far!" the hag screamed at me through the glass partition. "I assure you, you won't be alive when they get here."

She turned to her men, yelled, "Stop him!" and ran from the room.

Now it was me and the last of Horne's private army.

The glass door slid open, unlocked from a control pad inside. The goon squad came at me. I dodged sideways, gun leveled, firing round after round. Time crunched down, compacted. I saw everything in high-res, the hollow points ripping through cloth and skin and bone. The men disappeared behind clouds of blood like a fine mist. Every heartbeat was a moment in history, the sound compressed into super-slow-mo. I watched a bullet trace its way past my ear.

I hit the floor, gun smoking. Everything returned to normal speed, but it was too fast, too hyperactive. The silence was thunderous.

I'd landed next to an ugly steel structure probably meant as modern art. The grey blocks were fused together at sharp angles, geometric and cold. Behind it, a steel shutter began to lift to reveal the cityscape beyond. The familiar sound of spinning rotor blades appeared.

"Max Payne, this is futile. The deaths of your wife and daughter were necessary, inevitable. It is done. You cannot bring them back."

From somewhere in the building the hag's voice reverberated over the PA system again. Her pet demon began firing its minigun through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I was thankful for the bad art. I hid behind the steel structure as hundreds of rounds tore through the windows, cutting everything in the room to pieces.

All I could do was wait it out until the beast moved on, thinking I was dead.

“Max Payne, you are fighting a losing battle. You cannot survive this, you will die. Stop fighting. Make it easy for yourself. Accept your fate. You will die here.”

The chopper backed off at last. I took it as my cue, running across the remains of the room to the far door. Two suits came through it before I could get there. I slid across the floor, rolled and fired the Commando at the men until they were ground beef.

“Max Payne, face it, you’re up against an unbeatable force. You have already lost. You have lost. Only death will set you free from your pain. Accept it. Surrender, give up.”

The room beyond was a small library probably filled with priceless books. I didn’t have my library card. Instead I tried the door. Locked. The heavy steel structure was impenetrable.

A glass door on the other side of a rail led to a balcony. That was unlocked, so I braced myself and went outside.

The night was a howling monster. New York glittered below. This high up a single gust was likely to throw me to the pavement. But this was the only option left to me.

A small catwalk led from the balcony around the edge of the building. It had no railing, nothing to keep me from falling the hundreds of stories to the sudden stop far below. I hugged the slick glass of the tower and inched my way along to the adjoining balcony.

I rounded the corner of the tower and spotted Horne’s pet chopper. The deadly creature swooped at me from out of the howling storm. I hastened my steps as the minigun began to spin. I ran. It let off a firestorm of bullets.

I dove over a rail, a tsunami of broken glass washing down from above. The balcony exploded and I ran through the doorway into a museum filled with priceless pieces, all of them hideous. I didn’t have time for a thorough critique, instead I bailed through the next door and into the black cathedral of Horne’s operations room.

I caught a glimpse of the witch retreating from her mile-long desk staged below a massive digital map of the world. This was the throne room, the war room, the inner sanctum. I fired the Commando at her as she disappeared under a sliding panel.

I reached the desk as the panel slid shut. There was no seam, no handle, no hinges. I kicked at it in frustration, fired at it.

I ran back to the desk, searched it, threw the computer monitors from it. Finally I found the little button that made the panel slide up.

Open sesame.

The steel panel revealed a narrow staircase bathed in red light. The staircase ascended high up to the tower’s roof. The witch was reaching the summit when she turned and fired her own gun at me.

“That’s for you!” she screamed.

I ducked, suddenly aware that a grenade had flown by my head. I sprinted up the stairs like a possessed thing as the frag detonated at the foot of the well. Nicole Horne had already disappeared through a door at the top.

I slammed into the exit seconds later, in time to see the witch running for her escape-chopper, which was busy landing on a pad beyond a wire fence. The snow and ice whipped at my face, stinging my eyes until I could barely see. “Horne!”

“Not a step farther!” she cried into the night. “End it here, any means necessary!”

Two mercs came at me as she ran through a wire gateway. The mercs locked the gate behind her, blocking the way. A massive radio mast above us rocked and groaned in the gale.

The men began to take shots at me, their aim severely hampered by the inclement weather. I ducked behind vent hoods and air conditioning pipes as the bullets ricocheted into the night sky.

A sudden surge of wind bore down on the tower's rooftop, an invisible angry giant rampaging through the city. I hit the deck, unable to stand against the ferocity of the storm. Without warning, two of the mast's grounding cables broke free of their moorings at the roof's outer frame. The frayed cables slammed into the mercs, sweeping them off the edge of the building, their screams lost to the wind. The radio tower above flickered, its red warning lights beginning to wane in the darkness.

Then a third cable broke free. This one whipped across the rooftop into the base of the tower, sheering the steel frame. The radio mast leaned precariously toward the landing pad. Its progress was suddenly halted by the last cable, which snapped taught.

The chopper had landed. That was all incentive I needed to end this game of cat and mouse. I leapt for the edge of the building despite the gusting, freezing wind. The last cable mooring was anchored to the east corner of the tower. I raised the Commando, trying desperately to keep the sights steady. I fired a round at the cable, then another. The steel began to fray.

I heard the helicopter begin to power up the rotors again. Nicole Horne was seconds away from her escape into the abyss. Above the sound a million cop cars swarmed the streets below, their sirens rising into the night sky.

I fired again. The cable snapped like a whip. That was all the radio mast needed to crumple at the base, for the steel foundations to tear free from their concrete housing.

I watched the scene unfold before me. The radio mast falling through the air, the chopper's blades spinning as it began to lift off. Then the mast connected with the helicopter, slamming the tail into the ground, crushing the landing pad, and breaking the support beams that attached it to the side of the building. I watched as the whole mess slid over the side of the roof like a dying animal, an explosion rising up from the fallen chopper, illuminating the night and turning the snow into liquid gold.

Then it was gone, tumbling down the side of the Aesir building until the fireball reached ground zero. The explosion rocked the tower to its foundations.

I got to my feet, stumbled across the roof. I didn't know where I was going. The gun was welded to my hand, I couldn't drop it. I peered out across New York City.

They were all dead. The final gunshot was an exclamation mark to everything that had led up to this point. I released my finger from the trigger.

Then it was all over.

The storm seemed to lose its frenzy, and the ragged clouds gave way to the stars above. The moment was broken as a loudspeaker screeched from a helicopter. For a brutal second I thought that Horne had somehow survived.

"Max Payne! This is Deputy Chief Jim Bravura from the NYPD. We've got the building surrounded. Throw down your weapons and lie down with your hands behind your head!"

Now the stars shone brilliantly in the pitch black sky. A bit closer to heaven.

Cops rushed in, surrounding me. They ordered me to freeze, to get on the ground, to drop the weapons. But the voices were distant and muted.

They slapped the cuffs on me.

My ghosts released me from their haunting. Below, New York City glittered like diamonds on black velvet.



Down on the street the crowds had shown up despite the winter night. I was paraded through the masses by the cops to a waiting prowler car.

Bravura was there, his cheeks ruddy. “Payne! You gave us one *hell* of a ride.”

I couldn’t help but sense a smile from the chief. Something in his eye, maybe. It was there for a second then gone. “Take him down to Central booking!” he growled.

“You heard the man,” one of the cops said to the guy who had hold of me. I didn’t resist.

From the back of the cop car I searched the crowds. Alfred Woden stood among them, watching from the sidelines. It wouldn’t be over till the man with the eye patch said so. He’d say the right words. I knew he would. He’d better.

His eye caught mine. Woden grinned smugly. It was the grin of a winner.

That made two of us.